The White Circle

by Carroll John Daly

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By

CARROLL JOHN DALY

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	The Stranger in the Night	9
II.	The White Circle	14
III.	Money in the Bank	19
IV.	The Figure on the Balcony	27
V.	An Attack in the Dark	37
VI.	We Speed in Pursuit	45
VII.	Doubling for Hairy Neck	55
VIII.	Within the Dismal House	65
IX.	The Plot	74
X.	Melodramatic? Perhaps!	82
XI.	The Black Circle	90
XII.	A Ride Through the Night	99
XIII.	Two Telephone Calls	108
XIV.	A Flat Afternoon	116
XV.	Romance Dashes In	123
XVI.	A Message from the Black Circle	132
XVII.	The Call for Help	141
XVIII.	A White, Slender Arm	149
XIX.	The House Next Door	158

CHAPTER PAGE

XX. The Woman in Yellow 166

XXI. Indecision Again 174

XXII. A Promise to the Dead 182

XXIII. The Affair at Townsend's . . . 190

XXIV. A Single Shot 202

XXV. A Late Visit 213

XXVI. The Rendezvous with Evil . . . 223

XXVII. A Blow in the Dark 230

XXVIII. The $100,000 Face—Masked . . . 239

XXIX. Just Josey Mears 250

XXX. "I Know Who You Are!" 258

XXXI. Tongues of Fire! 266

XXXII. The Cat's Out 275

XXXIII. The Cloak-Room Check 284

XXXIV. I Use My Guns 293

XXXV. Who Is the White Circle? . . . 303

THE WHITE CIRCLE

THE WHITE CIRCLE

CHAPTER I

THE STRANGER IN THE NIGHT

I WENT to sleep broke—as free from money as a bluefish is from wings. And I went to sleep sober, without a care or a worry. It wasn't in me to drown my sorrow. I felt none—when a man comes back, he fights his way—not slops it. My life had been chuck full of adventure: South America, the gay boulevards of Paris, the shining steel in the hands of a vicious Arab in that romantic, forbidden section of the old hillside city of Algiers. Even the deadly, biting stillness of the jungle night in the sweating tropical climate of darkest Africa was not unfamiliar to me.

In New York I turned a little bank account into a fortune; the instinct to take chances made me in Wall Street, and that same instinct wiped me out. There was no kick. For two years I had *lived,* but there was nothing of romance in the city—the uncertainty of lurking foes, that living, breathing closeness to death that had ever been in my nostrils.

There was a certain pride, of course. I hated to give it all up—my club, my valet-secretary, the two cars and the stately brown stone house in the upper Eighties. I was getting to be a popular, dignified man about town, who had already gained entrance to exclusive society—if not ultra-exclusive, at least, ultra-rich. My sense of humor helped me with these people.

Puppets, most of them, and at that the wires didn't work so well, a jealous, planning, scheming, friendless people. Shrewd business, mad pleasure, hurrying youth. Yet, behind it all, some place was the thoughtless innocence of children. And—yes—I liked it. I was young and this was life.

Not a dollar in the bank, not a servant in the house, not a care in the world and—I slept like a child.

Far below me in that darkened hall the great clock struck two. Yet it wasn't that which woke me. I didn't start—came bolt upright in bed. I lay quiet, listening intently, every nerve tense, every sense strained to pierce the blackness. Some one had walked across the room and sat down in a chair by the bed. How did I know?

Impossible perhaps to explain that—but spend your life close to death and you *do* know. I was absolutely certain that another was in my room. Nerves? There's a laugh there—I haven't any. The past was sweeping back on me as I lay quietly listening. Not another sound—not an outline as my eyes tried to penetrate the darkness.

Two, three minutes passed, and we both played at this game of silence. A burglar? Perhaps! Something amusing in that. An enemy of the past? Hardly—I had shaken that life completely. Was there a gun beneath my pillow? Not in over a year now. The temptation to go back to the old life was too strong. I had discarded that when I put on the clothes of respectability.

Then I caught it—the faintest intake of breath—close—there on my right, by the side of the bed. Slowly, carefully, I drew myself to a sitting position. I had located my man. I smiled grimly. My lips set tightly as I slipped a foot from beneath the covers. It wouldn't be the first time that I had marked my man in the dark. Yes, and thrown myself upon him, too.

Was he armed? Perhaps — probably — but it's all in the game and there was a thrill in the feel of tightening muscles—the echoing voice of the past. Two years now since I had gone into action, and the sense of danger was not an unpleasant one.

Came a sharp click—the suddenness of blinding light, and I was caught—one foot on the floor, one still under the bedclothes. The lamp by the side of the bed had been switched on. There was nothing to do but slip my bare foot back beneath the warm covers. I was looking full into the mouth of a heavy black automatic.

The face behind that gun was compelling—steady,

gray eyes regarded me without a flicker and the knotted, skinny hand that held the gun was braced over the back of the chair upon which the man sat—one leg on either side of it—arms and elbows resting on the low back, and all the time the pistol pointed with a deadly accuracy straight between my eyes.

"Mr. Stacey Lee," his voice was steady and free from the slightest tremor, "I am sorry to come to you with a gun like a thief in the night, but it was the only way." The thick, lifeless lips smacked with a dull sound as his tongue moistened them. Indeed, he was a very little and a very old man. "You have nothing to fear," he added, as if it were an afterthought.

"You have a steady finger, I hope." My voice was not entirely free from sarcasm. "Those things will go off, you know. And you're wasting your time—though you may help yourself without interference from me. I need my sleep. To-morrow is a big day." I half threw myself back upon the pillows.

If he left my newly pressed suit and the two grips undisturbed, he was welcome to anything. To-morrow would see a parade of vulture-eyed creditors—to-morrow would see it, but not me.

He nodded, his wrinkled face cracking like dried parchment.

"Just so—a big day." He repeated my words very slowly. "You are leaving the country then—to-morrow?"

I swung half about, pulled myself up on the pillows again and gave this queer looking old man more attention. This was no haphazard visit then.

"You seem to know much of my business." I eyed him carefully. "Perhaps you have a purpose in coming here—perhaps you are—" I stopped dead. "Creditor," was the word I was thinking. Had the news of my sudden financial nose-dive slipped out?

"Much about your business—yes." And though his lips were hard and cold I was almost certain there was a twinkle in those deep gray eyes, a lowering of his yellow forehead beneath the thin, white strips of hair. "Your business is gone—your money is gone—all is gone, but your spirit perhaps. You have nothing to sell but that then—and that I am here to buy."

"Ah—the devil himself." I could not repress the smile. Yet there was nothing of looseness in those eyes. No drooping, inane expression about that determined mouth. No weakness of the chin. I was not dealing with a maniac—rather, a keen, scrutinizing, clear-eyed old man. What then was on his chest? So I played the game as I had so often played it before. The cards were in the hands of the man with the gun —let him play them. I waited.

CHAPTER II

THE WHITE CIRCLE

"Well," his left hand stroked his chin—his eyes narrowed as a man who carefully chooses his words, "frankly—I am here to offer you a business proposition—one that is filled with danger, adventure, even romance, and at times a sordid reality—which is life, as we see it. I want to help our people—I want to save some—I want to punish others—I want to make society a decent place for the young to live in—and I want you to help me."

"A large order." I whistled softly. Would it come to a case of humoring this old bird—then leading him home by the hand? No—honestly, I did not think so. There was a certain sincerity in his voice, a real determination behind, oh, behind that gun, if you'll have it that way.

"Yes." He fairly snapped out the word. "A large order—yet with the proper assistance, the inroads to success are already chalked out. This morning's news! A young wife a suicide. Position—money—children—a happy home—a loving husband. Why? Melancholia—a morbid mind—a hidden brain disease. All

are discussed as possible causes, and yet it was murder —the same as if the man had driven the knife.

"Still, that murderer walks the streets a free man, rubs elbows with innocent children, respectable wives, good mothers. Blackmail, my friend—these vultures who prey upon the follies of youth—simple indiscretions. But enough—" He waved his free hand, brushed his forehead, and I saw the sudden light die from his eyes—the color recede from his pasty, sunken cheeks.

"Come," he leaned so far forward that I thought the chair would topple over, "I offer you a freedom from all debts, a salary that may suit your fancy, a banker who knows no limit, and the romance and adventure you have left—and now would seek again. I have watched you, known of you for five years. I want a man with a fast-thinking brain, a clear eye and a quick trigger finger."

I stretched out a hand and lifted a cigarette from the little smoking table by my bed—slowly I lit it. The old man interested me—all nonsense, of course—a fanciful idea, and yet—

"You figure on killing all these—these vultures, as you call them?" I watched him closely now—the gun, too—would the moment come when I might have to make a quick lurch for it?

"What is this talk of killing?" And for the first time there was an irritable ring to his voice. "You think me a fool or a madman? I have money. I have

brains. But I lack youth. I want a man who can protect himself as well as protect others. Come!" he half stretched a hand toward me. "Much money—real life—and for a great good." He rose, paced once across the room, then stood in the doorway.

"I know how you must take this visit, how you must feel toward the supposed fancy of an old man. But—" a long, bony finger shot toward me, "if all that I say is true, if in the morning you find your bills met, your man returned and a balance at the bank—then what do you say? Will you do my bidding in all that an honorable man can?"

I stroked my chin.

"Your idea is that I should simply play the part of a —a modern Don Quixote?" Not that I took any stock—or at least much stock—in what he proposed. But the idea struck my fancy. I hesitated, looked long and earnestly at the little wrinkled stranger.

"My idea is simply as you put it. A modern Don Quixote. We must protect those who cannot appeal to the law. The poor and the helpless; the unfortunate and the wronged. We must ever extend a helping hand to those who have fallen and would come back. That is my idea—already practiced with some success. And my reason—" his voice grew very low. "I once had a son." He finished simply, but his lips came together with a dull, hollow click.

Did I believe him? No—the thing seemed too far-fetched for that. Was it sympathy, the lure of the

whole fanciful idea? I don't know. What did it matter? Perhaps I did not wish to hurt the old man's feelings. Perhaps I simply wanted my sleep. But—

"Yes," I said. "If what you tell me is true, I'll play your game." Then, as an afterthought, "What do they call you?"

His sigh of relief was clearly audible. Quickly he changed the gun from the right hand to the left, stepped across the room and shook my hand.

"They call me," he spoke very slowly and his lips were one straight line, "The White Circle." He turned and with a short, sharp gesture of farewell passed out of the room.

His feet creaked upon the stairs as he slowly descended. It struck me forcibly as his unsteady footsteps passed away—what an effort, how cautiously and patiently he must have mounted those stairs! There was a slight jar from below, the dull thud of a closing door, and silence.

The little old stranger had passed into the night. How had he entered? But I shrugged my shoulders, pressed out my cigarette in the glass tray and switched off the light. It would take a dozen little old men with weird, fanciful tales to make me lose my sleep on such a night. No dull, sluggish brain would serve my purpose of the morning.

A modern Don Quixote—silly perhaps, yet there was something alluring to it. To help others and be paid for it; to feel the thrill of real life in the dull

monotony of the great city; to— Bosh—impossible. I put it all out of my mind and passed quickly into a deep and untroubled slumber. Not to worry is the secret of youth.

CHAPTER III

MONEY IN THE BANK

THE sun beating on my face from a suddenly drawn shade opened my eyes. Again it was the even keel of my luxurious living. I stretched, slowly knuckled the sleep from my eyes, and came bolt upright. My man had been dismissed a week before, and there he stood now. Oscar, I always called him, though that wasn't his name—my secretary—my valet—my book of etiquette.

"Oscar." I spoke somewhat sharply as he turned from the window, his face as expressionless as a London fog. "This good and faithful servant business is O. K., but as they say in the movies—the game's up. Besides, when things get rolling this morning there may even be a demand for that hundred I gave you at parting."

"The game's up, *monsieur?*" He always said *"monsieur"* though Oscar was anything but French. "But I thought that the game was just beginning."

Was there a touch of secret understanding in his voice? I regarded him closely.

"Oscar," I never took my eyes from him, "why

did you come back?" The little old man, the talk of money, the bony fingers that had wrung my hand, the whole fanciful scene of the early morning was flashing before me.

"Your telegram, *monsieur.*" His eyes widened slightly. "Your change of plans, your inheritance, some discovered money, you were very careless about money."

"So I was, Oscar," I nodded. "My telegram—certainly—I had forgotten. The time, now?" I must think—consult my bank.

"Ten o'clock, sir." Oscar's voice seemed to come from a long way off.

I sprang from bed, stepped into my little dressing room and telephoned my bank. There was nothing of surprise in my voice, just the simple question I had so often put to them of late.

"Stacey Lee—balance, please." And the voice that finally replied was the most pleasant and gracious I had yet heard from that institution. Even those who are used to having thousands pass through their hands unconsciously soften the voice when speaking to the individual possessor of a bank account above the average.

I breathed easier. The little old man may have had his fancies, but certainly he was willing to pay a stiff price to satisfy them. Also—in some way I was expected to earn the money. Good! I had no qualms on that score. Money, and an interest in life—could man

ask for more, if you're inclined to be at all sentimental?

"You will have your coffee upstairs—until later you will read the paper and rest? And I must trouble you, *monsieur.*" With a deft twist he produced a check book and fountain pen from beneath his coat, much as a magician produces rabbits from a hat. "It is early, but already three nervous gentlemen await below. I am afraid, *monsieur,* that when you talked to them last week they misunderstood. Your tailor is the most offensive." And Oscar's nostrils contracted slightly.

Without a word I took the check book and sat down before the little flat desk. The checks seemed endless, the amounts stupendous. Half of them I signed—hesitated and looked up.

"You are sure, Oscar?" I asked.

"Absolutely, *monsieur.* This morning I went over the accounts again. Your telegram spoke of a deposit of ten thousand. And the cars," he continued as I wrote, "the touring. It might be as well to let it go. It has never done you justice—a sore eye to the establishment, if I may say so. Later perhaps we shall buy—"

"Just so, Oscar." I blotted the last three checks, snapped the book closed and thrust it into his hand. "You will see these nervous gentlemen. And later, perhaps—if finances warrant it we shall buy the new touring."

He half bowed as he closed the door behind him and passed softly down the stairs. Then in the hall below I heard him mildly censuring the hornlike notes of my former tailor.

A good servant, Oscar. Though angry voices barked below, they waited upon my coffee. From the window above I watched the scowling, determined men who marched boldly up my front steps. Each came in, a fearless, upright citizen demanding justice, and each went out, the humble, smiling tradesman. A new touch of life, that. What a difference, indeed, a few dollars will make.

For a week things went smoothly. I slipped easily back into my old life—and waited. And then one night, just after dinner, the expected visit came. Oscar, the placid, expressionless Oscar, ushered into my library the little old gentleman.

"We meet again, Stacey Lee," he said with a smile. "That you have not tried to discover my identity is to your credit. I trust that you know why I have come." He slipped easily into the chair which I pushed forward. "I trust further that you are of the same mind." Once again those shrewd gray eyes snapped up at me.

I smiled easily.

"Not only have I not changed my mind," I assured him, "but I am anxious to—to begin."

He nodded and smiled, his head taking on that queer effect of being strung upon wire.

"We play at a desperate game—you and I." The

slender cane that he carried shot out and tapped me on the knee. "You have heard of the Black Circle."

"No." I shook my head, then half humorously, "I have heard though of the White Circle."

"The Black Circle," he began, taking no note of my reference to the name which he had given a week before, "is a superior organization that preys upon the weak. Its leader is, I suspect, a man above suspicion."

"You do not know him then?" I had thought that my benefactor was working along more definite lines.

"No—I do not know him. His close associates do not know him. This man is the guiding hand of an unscrupulous gang of scoundrels. The meanest breed of criminals—blackmailers. Their resources seem unlimited and their activities enter even into the homes of our most respected citizens. You see, a victim who cannot pay is often the means of entrapping another—so this gang grows larger and more terrible as time goes on.

"If we could lay a hand on the leader—" and his little body straightened and his thin, lifeless lips formed one straight line, "then—to expose him—to denounce him—would send the years of his plotting and scheming tumbling in ruin. When you can show his face to me I shall gladly put one hundred thousand dollars in your hands.

"Until then—we must protect the weak, punish those

whose decadence makes them work for gain, free those whose fear makes them as putty in his hands."

"His—business is good then?" I had heard such stories of criminal organizations, but had always thought they practiced in the underworld—just on the seamy side of life.

"Good!" he exclaimed hoarsely. "If the truth were told there are not five families in ten who do not—perhaps only faintly—hear the rattling of bones in the closet. And the younger generation—" his wrinkled hands went far apart, "their eagerness for folly makes them an easy prey to these vultures of society."

"But the law," I started.

"Law!" he slid to the edge of the chair and leaned far forward, "There is no law to protect or punish in such cases. One has a letter, a secret, perhaps the knowledge of a crime. Money alone can buy silence. If the law steps in, notoriety comes out. Here is the vilest of criminal practices and one that fears no law. But they go too far—greed on occasions carries them beyond safety.

"I caught one—traced him through the pawning of a victim's jewelry. Gad!" he smacked his lips, "that man knew the leader—he was killed the night I expected his confession. I had him, too—his victim had stolen the— But enough—there is an unfortunate lady whom we must protect at once."

"And you have fought against these people—alone?"

His frail body, his bent shoulders and his knotted, yellow hands were strangely at variance with his talk.

"Alone—" he rubbed the head of his cane across his chin. "For our purpose—yes—alone. With trick after trick I have met them—until the White Circle brought with it the chill of fear. But strength must be met with strength, and violence with violence. I have chosen you as a man without fear—and to-night —" he came suddenly to his feet and taking a leather case from his coat pocket, placed it upon the table. "Come—listen. To-night your mettle is to be tested."

His yellow fingers opened the case. The flap fell back. I leaned eagerly forward—then half drew back in surprise. A number of circular white seals, a white mask and a heavy service revolver lay beneath the table lamp.

The little old man talked—ran his fingers across my table, moving objects here and there, much as a general lays out his campaign of battle. And the things that he told me were made vivid and real by the intense interest of his voice. Of a certainty I had entered into a compact where the life of a man was of little consequence, and my opponents selected from the scum of the world.

"Some day we will find the leader," the old man finished. "Or perhaps he will find me. But to-night, failure means the death of an innocent but silly woman. In the background you must always picture the little child whose unsoiled hands stretch out for

a mother's caress. It is for you to fulfill the wish of that child. For the battle of this woman, alone, is hopeless. She cannot pay and she cannot prey on the blood of her friends. She hopes in the White Circle."

"I'll do my best." I tried to show no emotion, but of a certainty this little stranger had already stirred up a hatred against my new enemies.

"Behind you, remember, is the wealth and knowledge of the White Circle. Think not of me—think of it. Serve it well and in serving it, serve humanity. Your pay—each success shall pay you handsomely. More I cannot tell you. Follow my instructions and when they will not serve you, act for yourself.

"But these letters must be laid in the hands of Mrs. Clayburn—" He leaned forward and whispered the name very low. "I will know at once if you have succeeded—and—your invitation is there—good night."

I watched him out without a word. Then I turned to the little engraved card upon the table. Stacey Lee stood out in bold type. Mrs. Robert T. Townsend was a name not unknown to me—but she was in the realms of social height that I had not reached. Still—the dance was to-night and the invitation was mine. I mounted the stairs, turned into my bedroom and drew back, slightly surprised. My evening clothes already lay upon the bed. But I shrugged my shoulders. Oscar was ever a thoughtful servant.

CHAPTER IV

THE FIGURE ON THE BALCONY

MRS. ROBERT T. TOWNSEND'S affairs were well known and much sought after. To receive an invitation to her dance stamped one as approved, and here was a well organized criminal society seeking its victims from among the chosen of the gods. In my year or more of useless living I had never climbed that last rung of the ladder, which would put me on the visiting list of this supposedly higher plane.

Not that either represented the aristocracy of the great city, but the Townsend circle caught the best of those just below and the slipping aristocrats just above. Smug respectability was at least being played at. The newly initiated had money; the old timers, a long line of dancing, useless ancestors. It was just a more careful dealing of the cards of life.

Oscar drove the car—his placid, quiet, confident carriage always gave me assurance. One could look out the car window and see dreams—paint a picture of the strange, fanciful life. Then a glance back at those narrow, slightly stooped shoulders of Oscar brought reality. Thoughts of a quiet season along the placid shores of the Mediterranean, or a gay life on the

Boulevards of Paris could be dissipated in an instant by the merest word to Oscar. There would be no enthusiasm as he quietly gave you your balance at the bank. Oscar was a practical man; nothing disturbed him.

Mrs. Robert T. Townsend's dance was too large for her own home and therefore the ball room covering the entire sixth floor of the Marston Hotel was taken over. I was evidently a late arrival, for there was no delay in swinging up to the hotel entrance. Oscar had his orders. The car was to be around the corner —Oscar ready at the wheel. The old man's instructions had gone just so far. My game was a desperate one.

But I shrugged my shoulders as I stepped from the car and entered the hotel. The pay was big and the purpose was good. If these crooks lived hard, the day was not far off when I had lived harder. And a hundred thousand dollars for a look at one man's face!

Mrs. Townsend smiled down upon me, puzzled, but my invitation was already in the hands of the liveried servant by the door. Robert Townsend, a great smiling, broad shouldered giant of a man, greeted me cordially enough—his little eyes opening and closing behind his thick glasses. There was no announcement from the liveried attendant. I turned and entered the gentlemen's dressing room.

A half glance over my shoulder caught the genial host carefully squinting over my invitation. A mo-

ment later another had entered and I was forgotten. Good! The last thing I wanted to-night was attention.

My first duty as I entered the crowded ball room and made my way carefully along the rows of chairs, dodging the swinging couples who jerked about to the dizzy strains of the jazz, was to find Mrs. Clayburn. No description would fit her that would not also fit a dozen or more gayly dressed—or undressed—women. And yet I didn't wish to appear to seek information. The very one I might ask might be the last I should wish to know of my interest.

So I trotted around the different anterooms, catching bits of conversation here and there. Although the name of Florence Clayburn was mentioned several times, not once did I see her or gather enough to recognize the charming, but distracted wife and mother.

I snapped open my watch—just after ten, and my appointment with her was for eleven o'clock. My employer had arranged that—the third balcony at the end of those dimly lighted rooms in the rear. I passed through the tiny rooms, disturbing several couples, who suddenly talked loud and laughed boisterously. A darkened hall beyond and the curtained glass doors —four of them, not over ten feet apart.

I partly opened a door and stepped on to the third balcony. I like to be familiar with my ground. Fifteen feet long—three feet wide—and below, the glare of the city; the long, winding thoroughfare with its myriads

of lights, the flickering flashes of motors, and once, distantly and faintly, the echoing bell of a fire engine.

Came the crash of a door as if blown by a sudden draft. I swung about. Was it fancy or had I seen a figure there on the next balcony—the white bosom of a dress shirt in the darkness? And now the growing impression that eyes were on me, that a figure crouched in the blackness of the second balcony, and that that figure watched me. Not sure, of course, just a hunch and that flash of white.

Turning my head, I lighted a cigarette and gazed out over the city. There would be nothing strange in a bored business man seeking the seclusion of the balconies, nothing strange in the other being upon the second, for that matter. But why the slamming of the door—the sudden turn of my head made the figure slink into the darkness. One reason only—the lurking shadow sought secrecy.

Had I anything to do with his presence? Could my purpose possibly be suspected? Was it just that the man awaited a lady? That was possible, more so than that he was there to watch me. Yet I am a careful man. The figure on the balcony disturbed me.

I stroked my chin as I turned back through the glass doors and passing through the darkened hallway sought the ball room. One thing was certain—that man would not be on the second balcony at eleven o'clock. If he was innocent of evil intent toward me and Mrs. Clayburn, he would be a much surprised

and mystified man; if his purpose was evil, so much the better.

For the first time the Black Circle would feel the hand of Stacey Lee. But I stepped quickly into the ball room and mingled with the people who were crowding from the floor.

My name rang suddenly in my ears.

"Stacey Lee." I swung about—then, "Mr. Lee, I mean—but it is rather good to see one from—from the old bunch."

"Josey Mears" I looked down at the slip of a girl, the top of her head hardly reaching to my shoulders. Josey had run with the old pack—an "in and outer" they used to call her, for we didn't see her for long stretches at a time. But I liked Josey—there was something sincere about her, that you didn't find in the others.

Perhaps it was that straightforward gift of youth. Nineteen—well, maybe, twenty-five. I am not good at ages, and there were times when Josey was very young, and times when she was quite a lady of the world.

"Now—both together." Josey laughed as she clung to the lapels of my dress coat.

"What are you doing here?"

"My first trip, Josey," I told her truthfully. "And you?"

"Oh—I've been promoted for some time." She threw out her little chin and laughed. "Besides—I

haven't altogether shaken the others—but I've missed you. A week ago, at Fowler's theater party! I'm kind of glad to see you again—Stacey."

"Only 'kind of.' Who can tell, Josey—perhaps I'll make good here; sort of on trial, I guess—and then we'll be going in to dinner again—and you'll let me have the gossip—and the next dance, Josey." I paused—the orchestra had started up again, an encore, and the soft strains of "The Old Timers' Waltz," drifted gently to us.

"Why not this one?" Josey laughed, and the next moment I was swinging across the floor, her lithe, young form held close to mine. There was something alluring about Josey—besides, she was a life saver now. I wouldn't be conspicuous as a wanderer about the room. A man at a dance without a girl is surely an object for suspicion, if not pity. Did I need a reason for being there?

One look at Josey was enough—her bright brown eyes—her little adorably turned-up nose—and her lips. But I raised my head and looked over the ball room. This was a night of adventure. Love or sentiment held no place in it. And with that came the thought to use Josey.

"The people?" I asked her. "I don't know a one. You must point them out, Josey."

And she did—couple after couple that we passed. The foundation for a good piece of out and out blackmail hung like a threatening cloud over one couple in

every five. Wives without husbands—husbands without wives—the looks of adoration that passed between dancing couples who had no more between them than an ear for good music and an eye perhaps for beauty. The bands of matrimony were not very heavy ties. Promotion in society had not improved things greatly.

Again, there were women whose cold beauty protected them from the slander mongers and the vultures who watched for their prey. Here was a wanton sort of beauty where family ties meant nothing—whose mode of life and passion for divorces presented a flashy view of life to the free and easy modern ethics of our rising generation.

Though her acquaintances seemed endless, the name of Mrs. Clayburn did not appear on her list. I bit my lip, but there was nothing for it but to give her the hint. I started with several names first—names which I made up—one or two that I had seen on the silver tray at the entrance; then I shot my question.

"And Mrs. Clayburn—I've heard about her. Is—she—?"

"Sh—" A tiny hand shot over my mouth. "Speak of the devil—" she whispered very low, "there—swing me around—the woman in yellow."

And I saw her—strikingly handsome—with a pale, proud face and delicate, sensitive, uncertain lips. The carefree, easy led sort of woman. A refinement to her face, some character perhaps, but little strength—and now great rings of black beneath her eyes—yes,

her eyes—I saw them for a moment only. She swung away in the dance.

This was the woman I was to help, the one who had neglected her family, played too near the fire, and now would give her soul to be kneeling by that little crib at home—a free woman—one who saw nothing unless it—

But Josey was talking.

"We'll make a night of it, you and I, Stacey. You know no one and I—well—I'll cut and cut—" Her hair brushed my cheek; her dancing eyes looked into mine—but I shook my head.

"Not to-night, Josey," I said. "Business—an appointment. Until eleven—"

"Until eleven—I like that. Well, I guess not. No, sir—I'm not going to lose all my partners. You're impossible, Mr. Lee—but, there, I forgive you." The frown had gone and Josey was smiling again. "I didn't know you had any business." She looked quickly up.

Was I fidgety—was I suspicious of every one—and Josey Mears? Ridiculous. I'd been out of the game so long—that was all. I laughed the question off and when the music stopped led her from the floor.

Unconsciously we made our way through the anterooms. None sought the little balconies—the weather was chilly and the wind raw. But here was a chance to verify my suspicions. A man with a girl had entrée any place. Why not step out on that second balcony—

just a moment—see if a figure still lurked there. It was dark—my face would not be seen—and my reason —again I looked at Josey and smiled.

But my plan did not materialize. Josey refused to be coaxed on to that balcony.

"Certainly not," she told me. "It's not proper for one thing—and it's too cold—wait until next summer, and then—" she pinched my arm ever so lightly, "we'll forget about the proprieties."

Five minutes passed—the music struck up again and a young man claimed Josey—I was left alone. Thoughtfully, I sought the smoking room. The temptation to step on to the third balcony again and peer into the darkness of the second was strong, but that would show too great an interest.

For some time I smoked in silence. Of a certainty it would be impossible to approach Mrs. Clayburn. Undoubtedly, she was watched. To be seen with a stranger would arouse suspicion. The third balcony had been chosen for its nearness to the ladies' dressing room—just a dash down the darkened hall and she would reach the glass doors. The coldness of the night was an added protection—before the music had fairly started she would be back on the floor again.

I snapped open my watch. It was ten minutes to eleven. There was nothing else to do but make sure if that figure still lurked on the second balcony. Suspense, I don't like. Mainly, I'm a man of action.

Without further hesitation, I rose, pushed my way through the ball room, back through the little parlors and into the darkened hallway. I was going to investigate that lurking figure.

CHAPTER V

AN ATTACK IN THE DARK

THE parlors were deserted now but as I passed into the darkened strip of narrow hallway before the balconies, a door closed softly. Was it the entrance to the second one? I could not say. One thing was certain—the man on the balcony would not be able to see my face.

I threw open the door, stepped quickly upon the balcony, and slammed it behind me. And that was that. Things happened quickly. For an instant I caught the flash of metal—something just above my head—and stepped quickly in. Not away from the blow, mind you—but toward it. Experience has taught me the value of that move.

And down it came. An arm shot across the top of my head. A heavy object crashed against my back. The next moment I had closed with the man—one hand seeking his throat—the other clutching at the outstretched arm above my head. Then I knew what that hand contained, for as we struggled there upon the balcony I heard him mutter, "I ought 'a' shot you down—you skunk."

As for me—I save my breath. I wasn't bent on trying to scare a man half to death with useless threats. I'm a powerful man—strong as an ox and not unused to the primitive struggle. But I fought mostly for his gun, slipping my left hand along that arm till I held his wrist. With a quick clutch I had it—felt the cold steel in my fingers—the rough outline of the trigger guard.

He gave it up easily, releasing his hand and jerking it down. I understood. This man didn't fancy brute strength. He was reaching for a knife—reaching for it and getting it, too.

His pale face was visible now, just the whiteness of it in the darkness of the night. I saw the knife flash up, and as he struck I threw my body forward, bending him back against the stone balustrade. His body gave beneath my pressure and now I struck—brought down that gun—the butt—just above the misty, shimmering face. There was a dull thud, a half articulate groan, and a helpless body sank at my feet. That man would be out for some hours.

I straightened—stretched my back, where the gun had pounded, and bending forward struck a match. A coarse, mean face stood out for a moment—a tiny mustache above thick, sensuous lips. There was a nasty dig above his forehead, too. A mean blow, that—but then, what would you have?

I couldn't just let the first ruffian of this gang strike me down at the very beginning of my work. He had

had murder in his heart, and in his hand, too, for that matter—which is more important. The White Circle was testing my mettle this night—here was the first blood for them.

Carefully I selected a white seal from the little silver case, moistened it with my tongue, and stuck it hard and fast on his white shirt front. Childish that? Perhaps. But then, there was the psychology of it. And the little stranger was set on it.

The Black Circle was the trade mark of the others—the forerunner of a deadly fear; here was our answering challenge. I smiled grimly, came to my feet and paused—some one had entered the third balcony. Then a clock far distant in the town struck the hour—I waited—eleven. Mrs. Clayburn was keeping her appointment—and I was not there.

I stepped to the end of the balcony, made out dimly the figure across from me, stretched out a hand and gripped the opposite balustrade. Mounting the broad railing I measured the distance—then jumped. Of course I didn't try for the opposite railing. It was too dark for that. I jumped well beyond the mark—landed upon the balcony and brought up smack against the lady I was to meet.

I had to place a hand over her mouth to stifle the scream. Luckily she couldn't cry out at first—and when it came it was a dull, lifeless affair.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Clayburn," I told her, still holding her in my arms, my hand across her mouth. "I didn't

want to frighten you—I come from the White Circle —you got the message to meet me here."

She half nodded and I released my grasp.

"You'll pardon my suspicious nature," I tried to make my voice reassuring. "But I can't see your face. Just sit here—no—I won't let you go over."

"It doesn't matter—it doesn't matter." And I don't think I ever heard such despair in a human voice before. "Nothing can save me now—I don't know why I came here—brought you, who are good and kind, into this danger—I've been a bad, foolish woman."

"Not bad—only foolish." I took her hand and held it in mine. I was not used to comforting women in distress, besides, time meant much—perhaps everything, with that unconscious man on the opposite balcony. But I did my duty as I saw it. Struck a match and got a glimpse of her face. A worn, tired, frightened woman—and, too, there was a touch of horror in her eyes.

"Why did you do that?" she gasped in a new fright.

"I had never heard your voice before," I told her. "I had to be sure—and now—to-night you must pay them—that's it, isn't it? How much?"

"Ten thousand dollars—more than I can ever get—and then—I doubt if they will take it—oh, the eyes of that man that I must face again!"

"And this man you must go to to-night—do you know just where he lives?"

"No—no." She shook her head. "I know noth-

ing—always they have come to me—now—to-night—I must go to him—it is my last chance to raise the money."

"Would things be so terrible if the truth came out?" I asked her.

"I would as soon throw myself from this balcony—sooner—" She bent her head upon her arms. "I have written terrible things—things that I never meant—that I would never dream of doing. No—I must die first—to think that my husband—that I could never raise my eyes to his again without seeing the loathing there—that my baby would grow to know—to be told. Oh—I have been bad—bad—and I want—so want another chance."

She was clutching me by the sleeve now. "You have promised me that—and another has told me—that the White Circle can save me. I am helpless and in your hands."

Another had told her! Here was news, indeed—but not my business there. A few rapid fire, pertinent questions, a quick judgment of her character and how far she was to be trusted—the certainty that even she should not see my face—and action. It was not for me to criticise or condemn her.

The letters—I was to place them in her hands—defy the Black Circle and make good my escape. Perhaps—but this was entirely my own thought—get a glance at the leader of these vultures. Yes, I'll ad-

mit I wanted to spot the man with the one hundred thousand dollar face.

Mrs. Clayburn was not clear in most of her statements. She did not know the time nor the place of her meeting—only that it was to-night and that she would receive word of it at eleven thirty—there on the balcony on which we stood.

Good enough! Where she went that night, I would go, too—but I did not entirely trust Mrs. Clayburn. Not that I doubted her intentions, but that I doubted her strength to carry a plan through. Her fear and horror were pitiable—and yet dangerous. I could feel her nervous fingers pawing about in my hand.

If ever determination to end it all was portrayed in every action, Mrs. Clayburn displayed such determination and an utter hopelessness. But I told her as much as I dared—as much as was necessary.

"I am giving you a package," I said. "It contains five hundred dollars. If I should fail to-night," and I heard her little gasp, "you must buy time with this. It makes no difference about the ten thousand—you would not get your letters anyway—but have them show them to you. And promise them more money—within the week. This is only a precaution."

I patted her cold little hand again. "We'll have those letters for you—never fear. Keep up your courage—and trust in us—but above all use every artifice to see those letters to-night." I slipped an envelope with its tightly bound bills into her hands.

"May I see your face?" She half came to her feet. "Just a moment in the light—that I may look—have the courage of your presence—feel that I have one friend."

"No—" I shook my head. "I'll be watching you to-night—always remember that—give no hint to any one of my presence—be brave and—"

The knob of the glass door creaked warningly. Some one was coming. Without a word I squeezed the little hand that tightly gripped mine, released with some force the clutching fingers and dashing to the end rail, reached carefully across and swung myself over. Half crouched on the second balcony, I watched the outline of that glass door with its narrow strip of dim light.

It was slowly opening. I sighed—relieved. That was why the watcher had stood upon the second balcony—to see that Mrs. Clayburn was alone—to watch if she communicated with any one. This messenger, too, was cautious.

The door opened, ever so slowly—and I straightened in the darkness, to recognize the face of the man who would appear. Not the leader surely—the little old man had told me that he was ever in the background—but perhaps a man who would lead me to that leader. But no figure appeared—a delicate, slender arm—white, pointed fingers—and the dimmest outline of a slip of paper.

Was it fancy, or did I see the black smudge of a

crudely made circle? The arm was gone and the paper had fluttered upon the balcony.

I turned sharply, half stumbled over the prostrate body, clutched at the railing for support, and reached the door. Just a crack I swung it open and peered into the dim hallway. Not a soul—then—just at the turn, by the entrance to the ballroom, I saw the figure of a girl—a girl in blue, her slender body swinging in her hurry.

At the ball room she turned—half glanced over her shoulder—and I caught the outline of a little protruding chin, the slightest reflection of a tiny turned up nose.

"Josey Mears," I gasped—and then, "impossible—just a likeness—nothing more." The figure had turned into the little parlors and disappeared. But I had food for thought. What did I know of Josey Mears? Nothing—absolutely nothing.

CHAPTER VI

WE SPEED IN PURSUIT

SOME one was coming from one of the little parlors—not in view yet, but steady feet beat upon uncarpeted, polished wood. I stepped quickly in and closed the door behind me. Perhaps some one sought a friend—but I swung along in the direction of the footsteps, head down, eyes up—well in the shadows. To see without being recognized was what I sought. Perhaps this man—for the footsteps were heavy—sought Mrs. Clayburn.

We almost brushed shoulders beneath the heavy curtain as the huge shoulders swung into view. It was Robert T. Townsend. There was no use to try to pass him—he had reached out an arm and clutched me by the shoulder—half leading me to the light. His laugh was rich and mellow, more like the musical note of a cultured woman.

"You rascal." He pinched my arm. And then—"Hello—it's Mr. Lee. I've been looking for you all evening. Didn't know you at the door—Mrs. Peterson's friend—mine." And a hearty hand clapped me on the back. "Haven't seen you dancing—you'll for-

give us, I know. Many friends—hundreds of acquaintances.

"Really now," and his voice grew confidential, "wouldn't know half the people if I met them to-morrow—but I'll take you around—can't have a new arrival—and Mrs. Peterson's friend—so badly out of it."

My hostess's husband—here was a real dilemma—a regular bore, who was fastening himself on me like a barnacle on a pier. His fingers slid down my arm and clasped my hand. A thick, flabby hand—like shaking hands with a sea lion. Gossip had told me something about Townsend—a stock broker of wealth, who sought position and married to get it.

Some had it—his craving for the social bug; others, his desire for new customers. Who the devil this Mrs. Peterson was I didn't know, and couldn't very well inquire. It was evident though that my little old employer had a string out in that direction.

I thanked Townsend and ducked the dancing. Mrs. Clayburn was still on that balcony and might step in any minute.

"Dead tired," I told him. "Just strolling about—looking for an opportunity to smoke—quietly."

"Good—just my idea." A huge hand caressed a shining forehead. "A lot of rot, this." Townsend was one of those unanimous fellows—seemed to agree with everything. "Come." A thick arm went through mine and we turned into the ball room, bumping many

dancers before we passed into a little unoccupied lounging room.

"Quiet here," my genial host went on. "Strangers don't know of it—kept specially for close friends." Then suddenly, as he offered me a high priced Havana cigar, "Married?"

"Not yet." I tried to smile as I looked him over. A good impression with this man would make me in society. There was nothing especially intelligent in Townsend's face. His deep gray eyes were shrewd and his thick, dominant chin not without character. His long arms hung almost to his knees, and he had a constant habit of raising the right to brush his forehead—the left to stroke his chin.

Some chin—my first impression was of a man without a neck—you couldn't see it, and when he looked to the side his broad shoulders swung in a stiff, awkward fashion. Too much beef altogether. He was big, of course, still he must have weighed a good two hundred and twenty.

Talk! Man, he was a veritable wind bag. His whole general impression of great benevolence, his condescending kindness in giving me his time, all marked me as the favored of the gods. What the devil did he see in me to interest him? Mrs. Peterson must have laid it on thick. Or did the others dodge this old he-gossip, and was every new arrival his "lighthouse in the fog?"

What of Mrs. Clayburn and her message? Any

moment now she might be slipping out into the city, for her rendezvous with the Black Circle. What could I do? What excuse could I make? Question after question he hurled at me. Like a careful society woman, he was getting my rating—chalking up in his mind my desirability. I—well—one gets strange fancies—as he rambled on I simply wondered how he got his collar on—where he put it.

The music stopped and I was free. Several couples sought the seclusion of that tiny room, and Robert Townsend pounced on them. I didn't bother to think of the bad impression I was creating. If he turned later, to introduce me, I did not know it—for his back was hardly turned when I had slipped out of the little room and sought the main entrance.

Mrs. Clayburn—was she gone? How could I tell—the ballroom was in confusion—couples stood here and there—the seats at the sides were crowded, the little parlors swarming with people—and even the entrance hall was filled with chattering youth, and would-be youth.

A hand clutched my arm. I looked down quickly—gasped—stepped close to a corner of the room. The gray eyes of the little old man looked up at me—angrily; I thought not—reproachfully; yes—that seemed it.

"I had to come," he told me hurriedly. "I am suspected—yes—but I came. Mrs. Clayburn has gone—just this instant—go—the red car—there by the side

entrance—follow it—protect her. You have delayed long—your coat check—give it to me—go!" The final word snapped sharply—his gray eyes sparkled, disdainfully or hopefully I could not tell which. Was he marking me as a failure?

There was no time to explain—indeed, explanation at such a time would be more than useless. I just grasped his hand, wrung those bony fingers a moment, looked straight into those flashing gray eyes, and putting my coat check into his hand, turned and walked quickly toward the open door of an elevator at the end of the brightly lighted hall.

A coin in the boy's hand—the request for a hurried descent, and the car shot down, the door slipping closed as it passed beneath the landing. No stops—straight to the ground floor we shot—I was out before the door was fairly open—ducked through the men's grill and on to the sidewalk.

And I saw it—the yellow dress peeping beneath the long fur coat as Mrs. Clayburn climbed into her car. She was alone—but for the man at the wheel the car was empty.

I didn't hesitate, cast a second glance at the red touring—but ducking behind it, dashed across the street and sought my own car. There it stood—five down—the engine running, but Oscar not at the wheel. Would I have to drive it myself? It looked like it.

The bright touring was already getting under way when Oscar silently dropped into the seat beside me.

The clutch was out—the gear already in first speed when his hand grasped my arm and his quiet voice spoke in my ear.

"Not yet, *monsieur*—such a move is suspected. Wait—"

I hesitated—half turned. What did Oscar know? And the red car—now it was swinging out—passing down the street.

"I stood in the doorway." Oscar read the question in my eyes. "Two men came close to me—talked—there is a plan to follow the red car. The blue roadster—there by the corner. From curiosity I listened. Now I see that you have an interest."

Impatiently I waited, slipping off my dress coat, and hustling into a heavy sweater and checked cap. Perhaps he was right—certainly it wouldn't do to be followed. Was I suspected? Hardly that. They were careful. That was all.

Mrs. Clayburn was a desperate woman—might have appealed to friends, even if she did fear the notoriety of the law. One thing was certain though—Oscar could be trusted absolutely. A minute passed—two—how could these others take up the trail? If Oscar—but now the little roadster had glided from the curb and rolled toward the corner.

My foot snapped from the clutch and we were off in a jerk. Around the corner—into the heavy traffic of the city, and the roadster was just ahead. But there was no sign of the red touring. Lost—a great mul-

titude of cars honked beneath the brilliancy of a Broadway night.

The roadster ahead was plainly visible—not hurrying either—leisurely it seemed to make the five blocks to the north, and then swing over toward the park. Far behind it, I held its trail—tightening the distance in the broad thoroughfare and dropping back on the side street.

Then ahead of us I saw it—the red touring—crawling slowly toward Central Park West. There was the blast of a horn from the roadster ahead—the red car seemed to understand—gathered speed and was lost in the shadows of the park. I closed slightly now. The roadster had little idea of being followed. It was the following of the red car that they feared.

A clever plan, that, and I'd have been taken in like a child if it wasn't for Oscar. Yet I was far from a novice at this sort of a game—a little rusty—but I felt, when the real moment came—perhaps when I faced these blackmailers with a gun in my hand, that—

But the blue car was showing speed. I stepped on the gas and gave chase—there were other cars—many theater parties going home. My position was fairly safe.

Far ahead, around a curve and through the meager foliage of the last dress of fall on the trees, I thought that the red touring stopped. And the blue, too, drove up alongside of it. I didn't dare to stop—I was too close, so I increased my speed and shot by—there were

two of us together—another car that also sped through the night.

Cross roads—an open space and the entwining thickness of huge bushes—not dense—but I took a chance—no car was just behind me. I turned on to the grass, circled behind the bushes—and facing the road again came to a halt. They would either have to turn around or pass our hiding place.

Jumping from the car and giving a few hurried instructions to Oscar, I slunk through the shadows back to where the two cars had stopped. Was this the rendezvous—would the taking of the money be negotiated there, right in the heart of the great city? Or—but hardly—and if Mrs. Clayburn was only to meet her guide there, why had they not driven away?

Distinctly, as I approached, I heard the plaintive voice of Mrs. Clayburn.

"But my car—I prefer to go in that—please." And then the low, inarticulate notes of a masculine voice. The blue roadster turned—sped back down the road—but now only one man occupied it. The other had climbed into the red car. Came the grinding of gears—the low voice of an order—a gruff answer—and the red touring continued in its former direction.

As for me—I ran in pursuit. It had hardly passed the cross-road turning, to the left, when Oscar drove from between the bushes, jarred on to the road, slowed a little as I climbed aboard, and once again we took up the trail—but this time it was the red touring that

we pursued, and Mrs. Clayburn was snuggled, a pitiable little figure of frightened womanhood, in the back.

There were no suspicious turns or twists or sudden bursts of speed. The Black Circle suspected nothing—simply careful, that was all. I breathed easier—the first trick was mine. I was on the trail.

Out of the park and up through Harlem we dashed, our speed increasing as the traffic slackened. But there were enough cars yet to protect us from suspicion. Into Bronx Park—out again—on to Bronx Parkway. The road was smooth and easy—but although the posts were already up no lights brightened our way. Fewer cars now—and I took a chance—dimmed my lights—then put them out altogether—nothing to guide me now but the dimness of the red tail-light ahead and the occasional glare of the approaching headlights of a car returning to the city.

Once came the shrill curse of an angry driver as our unlighted car fell into the glare of his lights—then silence. I knew that road—and the flickering lights of the Harlem division of the New York Central helped me. But always ahead was the single dimness of the red car's tail-light.

At Mount Vernon, fearing a stray motor cop, I lit up for a bit, but once we had crossed Yonkers Avenue we traveled again in darkness—nothing to warn the car ahead—not a sound but the gentle purr of a high-powered and well-kept motor.

Crestwood—the car ahead swerved sharply to the

left—for a moment I caught the glare of its headlights —and I, too, swung by the little station and again was following the dimness of the tiny red light.

I don't know as I had to be so careful. But I feared Mrs. Clayburn as much as I did her companion in the car. She would remember my promise to protect her and would constantly be looking back. I hadn't warned her against this. I hadn't been sure that there would be such a pursuit. I had hoped that she might communicate her instructions to me. But that was of the past.

The going wasn't so good. The road was rough. We turned to the left—along a country road—up a slight hill—and the car ahead swerved, disappeared for a moment between two great stone arches which stood out dismally dim in the pale light of the overshadowed moon. Slipping the car back down the hill to where I had seen a rough wagon path, I backed in. A sudden jerk—and the journey was over.

CHAPTER VII

DOUBLING FOR HAIRY NECK

BUTTONING my sweater tighter around me and slipping my gun into a loosely knit pocket, I hopped from the car. So far I had played the game delicately, pitted my brains against the brains of the Black Circle. And so far I had won out. Now for brawn against brawn—action—that was it. And my strong point was action; physical encounters, a quick draw and a steady trigger finger.

I stepped down to the tonneau of the touring, lifted up the rear seat, selected my coil of rope and a large clasp knife, and turned from the car. There was nothing for Oscar to do but wait for me there. To have him with me—yes, I thought of that—a good man, Oscar—but the White Circle wanted secrecy. My instruction had simply been to play the game alone. Oscar might guess—though, indeed, he never looked at me as I lifted my material for a rather strenuous night's work.

As I disappeared in the bushes I slipped on my white mask. That part of the arrangement I didn't fancy at all. I had been through many strange and startling adventures in my day. I dare say a good

deal closer to death than I'd ever be this night—but not once had I hidden my face. There seemed a certain shame in that—and yet in the end I must face men —men with long memories, black hearts, and perhaps quick trigger fingers.

But I shrugged my shoulders. The little old stranger must know his game—I was simply selected to play it —and was well paid. That part couldn't be forgotten.

Carefully I skirted around and approached the rear of the house. There by the front door I had spotted the dim outline of the red touring car—but now its lights were out and it was only a dark blot in the shadow of the moon. That the house would be guarded I felt sure. The rope I carried was for that watchman. My employer hadn't thought that out. It was my own idea. This wouldn't be the first impregnable mansion that I had entered—entered with a gun in my hand and the will to use it in my head.

Friendly trees with thick trunks, if not much foliage, together with the uncertain moon protected my passage through the woods to the house. I gave myself plenty of leeway, skirting well around back. A high wall surrounded the house and also added to my safety. The rear—that was my way. Cautiously I left the trees and snaked along the thick, dead grass.

The stump of a long-dead tree served its purpose, and, mounting it, I peered over the wall. Dark and dismal the great stone house stood out against the

blackness—and then a light—just a strip beneath a ground floor window.

The upper floors, so far as I could see, were in darkness, but the far side and the front I had not approached—that, then, was the place of meeting. The lower rear window I disregarded—I knew something of these old houses and the dim outline of a rear porch convinced me that the light came from the kitchen. Not a guard there—at least not one to fear, for no man looks from light into darkness.

It was the dark windows that I dreaded—and on them I must take chances. Impossible to tell what figure lurked in the house—whose eyes watched for danger. No fear of the law, perhaps, but there are times when timid victims turn to desperate avengers.

One thing bothered me. The secret of the house was none too well kept—else why Mrs. Clayburn driving there in her own car—with a clear idea of where she was going? Or had she been blindfolded? Impossible, that—still, her chauffeur had driven the car. But this was not the time for deep thinking. Here was the house—inside was the lady I was to protect, and perhaps the letters I was to give her. No sound—not even the stirring of the wind in the quiet of the night.

One quick glance through the darkness, a shrug of my shoulders, and I jumped—swung easily over the barrier and landed on all fours in the enemies' territory. The ice was broken—the game was beginning.

A faint sound—a step—the tread of feet upon leaves. I pushed myself close to the wall—clutched tightly at my gun—and ears straining, peered through the darkness. A figure—footsteps, clearly distinct now, as they stepped from dirt to gravel. Slowly he came, head turning from side to side—occasionally looking behind him, he passed the small back porch and approached the lighted window. There—he hesitated—in the light of the window the broadness of his shoulders—the outline of a peaked cap and square chin stood out.

Once he rubbed his hands together—then beat his arms across his chest. Here was the watchman and he was feeling the chill of the night. Another glance toward the lighted window, a hesitant step forward—and he stopped—stooped quickly and, lifting some gravel from the path, pitched it gently against the pane.

A second only—hardly more—and the light went out. I think, too, that the shade went up, but I could not be sure—still, the sudden blackness there behind the glass did not seem so intense. The man on the path raised his left hand above his head—drew an imaginary circle in the air and dropped his hand to his side again. A signal of some kind, surely.

Came the faintest snap of a catch, the creak of a rising window, and the dim shadow of a head. There, hardly thirty feet away, I lay still—watching intently every movement. The house was well protected then.

Scarcely breathing, I stretched far forward. The message might be of interest. Hoarsely I caught the voice of the watcher on the ground.

"Cold—it gets into one's bones—a cup of coffee now—did I smell coffee?"

"Eh—that you did." A murmur—an answering, muttered sentence, and the voice at the window again. "Come back in ten minutes—hot—steaming hot." A hoarse laugh and the window closed. One more rub of his hands—a muttered curse against the weather, I guess, and the outside guard resumed his slow, even walk about the house.

It didn't take me long to think out a plan. And it was a good one. One thing was as sure as death and taxes—I was going to enter that house. I don't fall down on a job, come what may. I had been paid well and it was up to me to earn the money. And now—for the first time I was getting the breaks.

I'm a good shot—lightning fast, and have nerves of steel—but that doesn't mean I can stick up a house full of people, grab a batch of letters, take a lady by the hand and calmly walk out. Oh, I'd try it if I had to—but—enough—I saw the possibility of eliminating two of my enemies.

For a while I waited, to make sure there was no other guard and also to time the watchman about the house. He didn't hurry any—I've practiced my count, and it was a full four minutes before he hove into view again. This time he did not loiter—cast only a glance

at the again lighted window and tightly drawn shade, and was on his way.

I counted sixty—a full minute—then, crouching low, I ran from the wall, crossed the grass, jumped the path and stood in the protecting shadow of the little rear porch. No slow crawling for mine—not across the open—too much time for a chap in the window to study out the shadow—and draw a bead on it perhaps. I wasn't any too warm myself. But I did get down to animal-like motion when I crawled upon the porch—there was no way to see me from within, but the boards were old and loose.

Slinking far back in the corner of the porch, protected on the outside by a huge pillar, above by the overhanging roof, which hid me even from the flickering light of the dull moon, I waited. Darkness without—blackness where I stood—and the watchman must pass directly beneath that rail. Through the crack behind the pillar, I watched.

This time he took so long that I thought he must have entered by the front of the house—or—had he met Mrs. Clayburn's chauffeur—was there trouble there—for I had seen the chauffeur's figure in the driver's seat? Was he the type of good and faithful servant—had he suspected something—perhaps attacked the watchman—sought entrance to the house and spoiled all my plans? And again the man who was making the coffee—if he missed the watchman when the hot drink was ready there would be an alarm. The

grounds would be alive with men. I clutched my revolver tightly—fingers wound about the trigger. If they searched and found me, I'd make their night an exciting one.

He came—again the swish of dried leaves beneath heavy feet and the outline of broad shoulders—the whiteness of his face. I thought of my own white mask and wished that the little old man had chosen a different symbol—but I jerked down my cap—pressed tightly against the pillar.

He must pass directly beneath that rail—I didn't expect a great deal of trouble.

These hired men of small pay generally have little stomach when their own life is in danger. My rope hung from my belt.

I could have stretched out a hand and touched him as he reached the railing—but I didn't. I'd wait until he turned—his back was toward me. And he stopped dead, reached a hand into his pocket, and brought out a small box. I won't say that it wasn't a bad moment, for I thought that he was reaching for a gun. Still, it was a bad moment for him—not for me. If he swung about with a gun in his hand, I'd have had him sure.

But this innocent old dear was bent on having a smoke—nothing more. I saw the match flare up—caught the outline of thick lips—the cruel glint of two piglike eyes—and the flattened nose above the hard-set

chin. A common thug, this lad—his dirty gray sweater well up about his thick, hairy neck.

The match flickered for a moment in dirty, cupped hands and died, to give place to the dull yellow end of a cigarette. I stepped out, threw one leg over the railing and dug my six-gun deep into his broad, stooping back.

"Not a word—and stick 'em up." Oh, I won't say that I don't like the dramatic. Men who live close to death generally get a thrill from it. But this was business. Here was a real underworld character, with the traits and tricks of his kind. Besides—no apologies—I know my stuff.

"Hairy Neck" knew his, too—the butt fell from his mouth and bounced upon the gravel. His head came straighter, and he breathed sharply through his teeth, like an animal. But his hands went up—straight and high, above his head—a nasty looking blackjack hanging from his wrist.

And that was that. This man knew what a gun in the back meant. It was quite evident that it wasn't the first time he had been tickled by the cold, hard muzzle of a cannon. I'm a thorough man. After all, it was business with me—and my life depended upon my work. I searched, not especially for weapons—he wouldn't be using them for some time—but letters; any sort of evidence that might lead to that hundred-thousand-dollar face.

A gun and a roll of bills was all that rewarded me—

the bills were new and thick. Business was good—the Black Circle paid his men well.

I worked fast—the coffee would be ready—and I didn't wish to keep the obliging cook waiting. In three minutes that guard was bound tight. If he wiggled a toe he'd get the feeling that he was having heavy exercise—then the gag—just a handkerchief, rolled and thrust between his teeth. I could see his eyes rolling—in wonder—terror, too, perhaps, as he looked at my white mask.

I couldn't help but smile beneath the mask as I pulled out a white seal and stuck it on his chest. This advertising—I couldn't see. But I wasn't the boss. The psychology was good, though—I could see his look of horror as he peered from the white circle to the white mask. This man hadn't made a peep since I stuck the gun in his back. But I'm not a heartless man.

Here was a poor, ignorant crook who no doubt knew no other life, so I propped him up close against the house, out of the wind, jerked his cap down over his eyes, and left him. It wouldn't do to place him on the porch—not so cold and hard perhaps as the stone and the ground, but his feet—I didn't fancy hearing a tattoo on those loose boards when I was passing through the house.

No time to waste now. I picked up the rest of my ropes, stuck Hairy Neck's gun in my pocket, and stepped right under that strip of light that came from beneath the drawn shade at the window. Then, as I

had seen the cther do, I lifted a bit of gravel and tossed it lightly against the glass. A moment's wait—but no dimming of the light—no white face at the window. I jerked my cap well down, pulled up my sweater and waited. Here would be a ticklish business.

Nearly a minute passed—I tried again—picked up the gravel—and hesitated; then I tossed it into the grass. Hairy Neck had only thrown once—I wasn't going to improve upon his method. Perhaps the coffee was not done. So beneath that window I waited—every nerve steady, every muscle taut but ready to come into instant play—living bands of energy. I don't need to train—I'm always in condition.

CHAPTER VIII

WITHIN THE DISMAL HOUSE

THINGS were not so good. Time was passing. I counted it up—and yet all told it wasn't over twelve minutes since I left the car—perhaps fifteen. But a lot can happen in fifteen minutes; it wasn't as though I had all night for my job. Mrs. Clayburn was in that house. Mrs. Clayburn was probably now begging for time to pay the rest of the money for her precious but very foolish letters. And I—I just stood below a smudgy, shade-drawn window, waiting.

There was humor in it, if you can look at it that way. Tragedy within the house, and a shivering man without—waiting the pleasure of a coffeepot. I didn't laugh, though. I set my teeth grimly—once more felt for the gravel and drew suddenly erect. The light had gone out. Eyes raised to the window—cap well down, I saw the shade go up and the white blotch of a face, indistinct against the pane.

My left hand shot up quickly, as I had seen Hairy Neck's—slowly I drew a tiny circle in the air and dropped my arm to my side again. So far, so good. Again the snap of a lock, the creak of the window, and

the glass went up, revealing but faintly the white outline of a face. My face I kept down. It was very dark where I stood, but my white mask might show—warn the man in the window.

"Here's your mud." He shot the words through the side of his mouth, marking him for a jailbird, as he extended his hand, leaning far out of the window. "I put something in it beside me finger." He laughed in a hoarse whisper. "I'm tellin' yo—" he stopped dead.

Glancing up through the slits in my mask I knew that he was suspicious; the hand that held the steaming cup trembled slightly, half withdrew—and I acted. Just a jump—a sudden hurling of my body forward and I had him by the throat.

All my strength was in that one clutch—that one tightening of my fingers—that one jerk of my arms—straining upon every muscle in my back.

"Damn my hide—g-r-r—" The rest of the words stuck in his throat as I dragged him through the window. Surprise had dominated—fear had not come yet—with that fear would come his shriek of warning. But it came too late. Hurtling head first through the window, he turned in mid-air and landed heavily upon his back. The wind was completely knocked out of him.

My hand was across his mouth, but his cry when he landed was a pitiable, weak little thing. He just lay with his arms outstretched upon the path. This

boy didn't need any threats—any order to "stick 'em up." His head rolled from side to side—the whiteness of his eyes showing as he frantically sucked in the air.

I let him help himself to that for a while, for he'd have tough going the rest of that night—or at least a good part of it. Perhaps they'd search for him, find him, too, but by that time I expected to be out of the house and far toward the city.

This fellow was not quite as easy to work on as the other. He was completely knocked out and not open to orders. When I wanted him to turn over I had to turn him. He wasn't fully aware as to just what had happened, and by the time he was able to cry out the opportunity was gone. He just lay there and stared at me—eyes wide—questioning—brows knitting occasionally, as he tried to piece things together.

He wasn't used to heavy thinking, I guess, but he took to his gag like a little man, and I had him as nicely trussed up as his dear colleague in no time.

Again I pulled out the white seal, and as he wore no cap I stuck it straight in the middle of his dirty forehead. The white stood out through the dirt like a bright moon on a cloudless night. He watched me now and understood. I could see the same sudden fear creep into his eyes, so I helped things along—stamped more vividly the terror of the White Circle within that sluggish brain.

"Just so I can come back and know where to shoot you," I told him, "if you should manage to get that gag off and make a fuss." With that I eased him over against the wall in the shadows. One night's work, and three seals gone. Really, I should have been in the advertising business. Not so bad!

The show was on. The curtain was going up for the first act. Time meant much and I didn't hesitate. My shoulders just reached the window sill—a jump, the slightest wiggle of my body, and I swung over the sill and dropped lightly to the floor within.

Wood. I hit it right; it was the kitchen and there was a speck of light—a small blue flame and the gentle hum of a kettle. I looked more closely—not a kettle, but a percolator stood upon the gas stove. Merrily it sent up the aroma of strong coffee.

A light was fairly safe. If the coffee-maker had one, why not me? I closed the window, pulled down the shade and, holding my revolver in my right hand, slipped my electric torch open with my left. A stab of yellow. A good sized kitchen, this. A door with a key in it, which evidently opened to the cellar, also a heavy swinging door that led to the dining room—or more likely the pantry—for the house was large and old.

I was cold and chilled myself. After ducking my head through the swinging door, which proved my idea about the pantry, I stepped back and, taking a cup from

the table, gulped down the steaming black coffee. On the table, too, was a pint bottle of whisky. That must have been what the cook meant when he said he put something in the coffee besides his finger. Good! I like to clear little things like that up. But I passed the whisky. I needed a clear head, a keen eye, and fingers of steel.

The thrill of the thing was on me as I passed into the pantry, smothering my light, and poked a head out the other swinging door. The past was sweeping back and guiding every movement; the glamour of the old days was ringing in my ears.

Not a light—every shade down, for no glimmer of the moon shone through the windows. Not so good, that—and yet— I let the door slip close behind me and stood in the room. Silence—a deadly, eerie calm lay over the house, and yet I knew that at least two other persons were there—some place in that vast stillness.

There was no use—I couldn't stumble along through the darkness; no chance to get used to that sort of blackness and see my way about. I had to try a light. Dangerous—yes—but if no one was watching its sudden glare would not be seen—again, mightn't the cook be expected to step into the dining room for a moment? Surely, with one guarding without and another in the lighted kitchen below, they had no immediate fear of sudden attack.

I snapped on my light, took in the front room ahead of me, and the outline of the front door through partly drawn curtains. A second only and again darkness.

The hall—that was where the stairs would be—and Mrs. Clayburn—above, surely. Like a careful pilot who has studied his channel until he can find it on the darkest night, I made my way around the table, took six steps forward, felt of the big chair that I had seen —stepped to the left, reached the curtains, and passed through them into the hall.

The stairs—of course they were there. A sudden flash of my light might be suicide now, if some one watched from above. It was slow going—why didn't I hear voices? I stood with my back to the door—the stairs must be straight ahead. The door was in the middle of the house. There must be another room at the other side. And suddenly I knew where the stairs were. A light flashed up—came a heavy step—the cold voice of a man and the tearful sob of a woman.

Then I saw them—a pale, sallow little fellow in evening dress stood at the top of a flight of wide, old-fashioned stairs—one step down he came and extended his hand above. A flash of yellow—a champagne colored stocking upon the steps, and Mrs. Clayburn, ignoring the outstretched hand started down the stairs.

"You mustn't blame me, Florence," I heard the man say. "I am doing all that I can to help you. It was just that I heard of your plight and that I, too, had—

but you must listen to-night. Things are not so bad as you think."

"A way out—yes, a way out to-night. You lie and you lie—and advise me deeper and deeper into this man's hands. The Black Circle—the Black Death it should be."

"Nonsense—" But I did not hear more. I crouched behind the curtain as I slipped into the front room. Things were going to happen quickly—a minute or more now—the cook would be summoned—missed, and a search made. I clutched my gun tightly—half felt of Hairy Neck's automatic in my pocket—and waited.

Not another sound in the house but the tread of those feet upon the stairs. A hope there—I could stick this fellow up. But then, what benefit would that bring me? The letters would still be in the hands of the enemy—a night's work gone for nothing—and the secret out to the Black Circle that Mrs. Clayburn had powerful friends. I set my lips—those white seals would let a dozen or more cats out of the bag.

Cautiously I peeked through the curtain. Dimly I made out the two figures there in the hall at the foot of the stairs. Would the man strike a light—would he pass by me to the kitchen—would he call for the coffee maker—or perhaps even wish to question Hairy Neck? It was a bad ten seconds, anyway you look at it. And then—just a silent, thankful prayer that I had not tried a light in the hall.

Came a metallic sound, as curtain rings moving across a smooth surface—the swish of heavy draperies —and another voice—a masculine voice, deep and soft.

"You may bring the lady in. For her own good we hope you have reasoned with her." A movement of feet—the intake of breath of a frightened woman, and the voice again—more distant now, but clearly distinct. "A chair—there beyond the curtain—we'll have light in a minute—you can feel the chair—sit down, Mrs. Clayburn."

Dimly, as my eyes grew accustomed to the feeble shadows from the light on the landing above, I made out the curtains across the hall, saw that they had passed between them. I searched the narrow hall with my eyes for lurking shadows. None.

A white hand slipped through the edge of the curtain—groping fingers played in the darkness—there was the faintest snap—and complete darkness. That white hand had pressed a switch which put out the light above. I nodded—that suited me—three catlike strides and I had crossed that hall and felt of the curtains. The heavy breathing of a man—the hysterical sigh of a woman. These birds had certainly studied psychology—Mrs. Clayburn was feeling fear —the deadly horror of the unknown.

Click—I jumped back—the room beyond the curtain was flooded with light. A thin stream of yellow shot from the floor to the door-top. I tightened my grip

upon my gun—years before there would have been no start like that. For a moment I had thought that electric light button the snap of a pistol. Now—I stepped again to the curtain and peered through.

CHAPTER IX

THE PLOT

MRS. CLAYBURN sat, a huddled heap of frightened womanhood, in a plain kitchen chair. By her side was the sallow faced man—young, hardly twenty-five. Not the criminal type—just a weak sister, I'd spot him for. To the right of the door stood another, his back toward me, his arms folded across his chest.

But the main attraction of this silent assemblage was the figure who faced the others—the man in evening dress who sat behind a long flat desk—his elbows upon it—one hand upon his chin, the other playing with a long slender pen that he occasionally dug into the smooth surface of the highly polished desk.

"We meet in the light, Mrs. Clayburn—face to face." His eyes, black, piercing ones, rested full upon the woman—the pen half waved in the air and pointed directly at her. "Does that not tell you something? Doesn't it show you the confidence we are placing in you? Though my face may be unfamiliar to you—but enough—we have something to sell—something which cost us much to buy. Good business men must realize a profit on their investments. You cannot pay the money. That is certain, isn't it?"

"Oh—but I can—and I will—here." I saw the woman lean forward in her chair—nervous fingers opening the little bag that she carried—and the whiteness of an envelope.

The black eyes behind the table raised—the mouth opened slightly. Surprise certainly—pleased surprise. I thought not.

"You have there—ten thousand dollars?" And his tones were not pleasant to hear.

"No—but some of it—just to—oh, give me another week—this little is to show my good faith."

"And how much is this little?" I caught a relieved note in his voice.

"Five hundred—but in a week—less perhaps—" she gulped the final words as his cold eyes showed no enthusiasm.

"Where will you get this ten thousand?" he questioned sharply.

"Get it—" she hesitated. "An uncle who just died—property that must be sold—will be at once." She half came to her feet. The sallow youth's hand went out and pulled her back to the chair.

The face of the man behind the desk showed no emotion. His pen waved across the desk, dipped into an inkwell, hovered for a moment over a bit of paper, rested there as he spoke again.

"The name and address of this uncle—quick—at once." The eyes flashed, held those of Mrs. Clayburn as a huge snake holds those of a monkey.

For a moment she did not speak. Then her eyes fell. Her head turned left and right. She rose and swung toward the curtain.

The woman appeared panic-stricken! Would she try for the door? Would I have to protect her retreat without the letters? But no—she saw the uselessness of flight—and the hand of the sallow man detained her —his low voice buzzed in her ear. She turned—fell into the chair again and buried her head in her hands.

"I'll have the money—I'll have the money," she kept muttering over and over.

The man behind the desk smiled—his lips curling at the corners. For a moment he drummed upon the desk—and waited. A man to be feared, this—a patient, cruel, far-seeing man. His eyes stayed upon the heaving shoulders of his victim. When she had calmed somewhat—her shoulders ceased to shake—her sobs growing less violent, he spoke.

"It does not matter about the money. We do not want it now."

Her hands fell from her face and she came bolt upright in the chair.

"You are going to turn those letters over to my husband—make them public—" and after a moment's silence— "when?" One word—but what meaning—what abandonment of hope! It was as if she said, "I shall never know the disgrace—I shall be dead."

"Let us hope, Mrs. Clayburn, that we shall not have to take such drastic measures." His lips slipped back

and his sharp little teeth showed. "Billy Watson there can tell you that we do not always hurt—but sometimes help. Billy had a weakness for fooling with checks—now—he has no need of that. He has friends who supply him liberally with money. I tell you much, for I expect to make of you a friend—a confidant."

"You—you—" She shrunk back in the chair in horror, then, "My letters—you have them—yet?"

"Certainly." He nodded. "And for a few minutes work you shall have back those letters—a simple thing—free from danger. You will agree, I am sure. You have another to think of—your child, Mrs. Clayburn—your baby girl."

"I will kill myself before the truth becomes known." Her hand clenched.

"I think not." The leader shook his head. "Your baby will need you. I could tell you many sordid stories of girls who lacked the guiding hand—the protecting warmth of a mother's love. The future—what may become of the baby when—?"

"No—no—don't—I can't stand it." Then suddenly calm, "What do you wish me to do?"

"Little." His hands went up deprecatingly. "Your husband is a chemist. He works upon a gas—indeed, has completed his experiment and awaits the day to officially demonstrate to the government. You know where he keeps this paper?" The words shot suddenly out—took the woman entirely off her guard.

"Yes, I know," she muttered, thinking of her child,

I guess. Then her expression changed. Her face turned from a pale white to heavy red—flushed scarcely a moment—and the dead whiteness returned again. She had spoken without thinking, and now would have bitten out her tongue to recall the words.

"Ah." For the first time the man's face showed expression. "The chief—the Black Circle will be pleased at such news." I guess I sighed inwardly—for a moment I had thought I might be gazing upon that one hundred thousand dollar face. But the man was speaking.

"You must produce this paper—this formula—make an accurate copy from the original—and it must be done at once. For that we will return your letters."

"Why—why—" Mrs. Clayburn gasped. "The thing is worth more than ten thousand dollars—a fortune. He has set his heart on it—it's his greatest work—his—I can't—I can't."

"Think." The speaker leaned far over the desk. "There is no danger of discovery—you make a copy. Your husband will never know—simply two chemists with the same idea. Your mistakes of the past will be wiped out—the love of your husband and child will be assured—and—it is little money—you are not poor—your husband will invent other things—forget this in a short time."

He came suddenly to his feet—pointed a finger dramatically at the trembling, pitiable little woman. "You have a minute only to decide. The Black Circle

grows impatient—to-night he will visit here. To-night —your husband will awaken—to receive two of those letters—the other will be made public. Yes—or no."

As for me—I got a thrill in that. The Black Circle was coming. Or was that a bluff, to inspire a new fear in his already distracted victim? Poor little woman—she couldn't fight any more. I didn't blame her overmuch. A few, quick, frightened glances she cast about the room—perhaps she was thinking of my promise—the protection of the White Circle. And with a sudden straightening—she remembered my instructions.

"Let me see my letters," she cried. "Let me know that they are here—that he—let me see them." Was there a hope in her voice that I had already gained possession of them?

"And then—yes or no." His finger still pointed at her.

"And then—yes." The word was very low—yet clear.

The man nodded in satisfaction—lightly flipped open a drawer in the desk—pawed about a moment and brought out a little bundle, tightly bound.

"Your letters." He stepped around the desk and stood before her. "No, my dear, you may not handle them—keep your seat—but I shall show you—certain passages." He snapped the rubber band—carefully shot back the flap of an envelope—removed several sheets—and glancing down read aloud, " 'your arms about me, my head upon your chest—and now—the

smell of horrid acids upon Frank's coarse, rough fingers. And you—' "

"Don't—don't!" She fairly shrieked the words. "I was mad—not myself—a foolish quarrel with my husband—Frank—I love him—he must never know—"

Dramatic moment! Could you have picked a better without a dress rehearsal? Why, this was a chance that comes once in a lifetime. Here were the letters—and there was my cue. Gun drawn—I just tossed back the curtains and entered the room.

"And he won't know, Mrs. Clayburn." I just stepped by the chairs and pulled the letters from our friend's hand. Easy? Man! He just stood there with his mouth open and his fingers inanely clutching at the empty air.

It was all done so quickly that I was back by the door—my gun waving at the other two men, who stood paralyzed with surprise. It was a great minute—no denying that I enjoyed it. What to do next? One thing I know is my business, and this was my business now. It was not an entirely new situation. The sallow faced youth was not to be feared.

The other, who stood with folded arms, was an unknown quantity. The dark-eyed, dark-haired leader, who stood now in the center of the room, was the one who must certainly be watched.

"The White Circle!" gulped the astonished leader—and those were the only words spoken.

If I could have trusted Mrs. Clayburn I would have had her search the lot—but she might get in the line of fire—might make any one of a hundred mistakes.

"Mrs. Clayburn," I dropped the letters into her lap, "your letters—take them—pass by me—step out the front door and drive off in your car. Be sure you have the right letters. Then burn them. Now—move quickly. And drive fast, away from the city, so that you shall not meet any one coming from New York."

My cold even tones took the sobs out of her. She came to her feet, wavered a bit, half staggered, and fell up against me as she passed. That was bad! All hands were in the air—but for a moment Mrs. Clayburn stumbled, half blocking my vision—knocking aside my gun arm.

CHAPTER X

MELODRAMATIC? PERHAPS!

Oh, I saw it. Just the flash of the leader's hand as it shot downward. Where his gun came from it was hard to tell—he was remarkably quick. I fired wildly, blindly, above Mrs. Clayburn—pushed her aside, hurling her to her knees. And his gun spoke. Orange blue flame showed dimly in the brightness. There was the thud of a bullet—the splintering of wood. He had missed. He didn't fire again—no more than tightened his finger on the trigger.

There are few men who get two shots at me. My finger closed—my eye never wavered along the barrel. One blackmailer was certainly out of the running; his knees sagged. His gun turned in his hand, then fell from lifeless fingers. Without a word he sank to his knees, stayed there a moment as if in prayer, and tumbled to the floor. Something told me that this dark-eyed scoundrel had preyed upon his last victim. I'm not one to miss.

The lights went out—darkness—sudden and impenetrable—had settled over the house. I didn't fire.

Both these men probably had guns. If I hit one, the flash would give the other my position. In that one

tragic moment when the leader and I both faced death, one of the others had acted—switched out the light.

I dragged Mrs. Clayburn to her feet, pulled her through the curtains, out into the hall and to the door. Frantically, I tore at the bolt, snapped the door open. It stuck—held tightly—a chain. Another precious moment—a shot—no whizzing bullet—no warning thud—nothing but the echoing report—and I had the door open, and shoved the woman out into the night.

"Your car—quick," I whispered hoarsely. "I'll protect your retreat."

"And you—what of you?" I heard her hollow voice as she clung to my sleeve. A little lump in the throat, that somehow gave me just the right feeling—that if I had killed, I had killed to save a good woman. Even in terrible danger she could think of the man who had saved her.

"Go—go!" I insisted. "I'll be all right—and the letters—when you're sure, destroy them." Another thrust and she was gone—running rapidly across the porch and down the front steps. Came the purr of a motor—the grinding of gears—and I felt that she was safe.

I'd wait there a moment, to the side of the front door. The Black Circle himself was expected. If his assistant was such a hard, cruel, unfeeling individual, what must the head of the organization himself be? Wouldn't the others fear his wrath at the escape of

their victim? Wouldn't they even now be planning pursuit? Wouldn't they follow the car and stop it even on the outskirts of the city? Good—I'd stay behind and see that Mrs. Clayburn got a good start.

That was my reason for waiting, I told myself, but in my heart I knew that I wanted to get a glance at the one hundred thousand dollar face.

A minute passed—two—no lights flashed up from within the house—no purr of a motor, and I was sure I had made out the dark lines of a garage on the off side of the house. Weak sisters, both of them, I guessed. With their leader out of it they were helpless. So I waited, my eyes ever watching in the darkness within—and an occasional glance at the moon-lit lawn.

Distantly down the road, not in the direction Mrs. Clayburn had taken, but in the direction from which we had arrived, came two flashing lights—the hum of a powerful motor. The lights flashed a moment as the big car turned in beneath the stone arches, dimmed and went out. A black bulk swung up to the door, turning into a large sedan as it came into the moonlight.

I gasped—stepped back into the darkened doorway. The first figure to alight from that car wore a mask, a black mask. That others got out behind him did not interest me. Here was the Black Circle—and even to the house of his friends, of his own men, he came masked. That few knew him, I could believe. To-

night then, there was to be a meeting of some importance.

I was trapped. A dash along the side porch and off in the darkness might get me clear, but there was a long, open space—and several men to shoot at me. Inside the house was my best place—surely none would suspect that I had stayed behind—dared to lurk in that house occupied by the enemy. But there was nothing else to do. I backed into the doorway, slipped through the dining room as the footsteps crossed the porch and entered the hall.

A curse—a hoarse voice calling for "Eddie"—and a gruff demand for lights.

"That you, chief?" A trembling call came from the floor above.

"It's the chief, yes," a voice from below answered. "Where's the lights—what's happened here?" The flash of light—another curse—a cry—then several voices at once—and clearly one above the others.

"It's Pigion, and he's out—right through the forehead."

What would they do now that they had found their dead brother? Hand on the pantry door, I listened. Came another voice.

"It's the White Circle." And though this voice shook with passion, I felt that it was disguised—the natural tones kept from its companions. The Black Circle himself, I thought. Came orders quick and sharp. "Three of you to the grounds. This settles—

this ends the White Circle farce. A joke before—now, killing—the old fool will—" and his voice rumbled off into nothingness. Then—suddenly, "All lights, and search the house. He's not here, of course, but search thoroughly. He may not have been alone. Let us hope the letters are safe." Now what could he mean by that?

But it was my cue. I could walk out and take a good slant at that one hundred thousand dollar face—but something told me this wasn't the time for it. Here was a man who knew his business. The first act was over and it was time to drop the curtain. I just slid through the pantry, into the blackness of the kitchen. I'd be out that window and over the wall before any of them could reach the grounds.

Up went the glass—over went my leg—and I stopped dead. A figure was looking directly at that window—a figure who raised a gun—pointed it—and hesitated. And I recognized those shoulders—the steady, calm attitude. It was the same lad who had stood in the room, with his arms serenely folded across his chest.

He saw me all right—there couldn't be any doubt about that. But he wasn't sure enough to fire. I might be one of his own crowd. As for me—if I wanted to fire at him, the chance was gone—for he slipped behind a tree, whistled once and was quiet. Running feet beat upon the path—came an answering whistle and a call. I dropped back from the window—shut it silently and turned again toward the pantry.

A hoarse whisper—and I stopped dead—then a voice.

"Mulligan was crashed on the balcony and a white circle pasted on his chest. Let's have a look in the kitchen."

I had heard enough. No chance that way; no chance out the window. The cellar was the only way open. Groping for the door, I found it, spun the key, slipped the door open, and pulling it to behind me, felt my way down the steps. A turn—half a trip, and I caught myself. Slowly, catlike, I descended to the dampness below.

How many lights they'd have to switch on down there, I didn't know. If they searched till they found me, things sure were going to end for me—and they were going to end in one mighty burst of glory. The fellow who got me wouldn't live to blow about it—that much was certain.

The last step, I let myself down it, stretched out my hand—emptiness. Where would the windows be? No moonlight there—windows too dirty, I guess—unless they were boarded up. Pleasant thought, that. I'd have to chance a light. I couldn't stand there playing blind man's buff while some killer switched on the light from above. A pretty picture the representative of the White Circle would make then.

A deep breath—the slightest swish of wind—a touch to my sleeve, and a figure slipped by me. A figure that, no doubt, was going above to cry the alarm—a figure

which lacked the stomach to fight it out alone in the dark.

I didn't dare fire—advertising wasn't in my line now—but I shot out a hand—clutched a naked arm—and drew a wildly fighting body toward me. The next instant my fingers were on a soft throat—hair brushed my cheek—the aroma of perfume played gently in my nostrils. Gad—it was a woman.

My fingers just naturally slipped from that neck, my two hands tightened about small wrists. Even in such danger it somehow went against my grain to choke the breath out of a woman. I could threaten her though—and I did.

"If you open your mouth I'll—I'll— And I stopped. The words wouldn't come. The little form so close to me seemed pitiably weak.

"Where are the windows?" I asked gruffly—trying to put fear in her heart by my threatening tones.

"All boarded up," she gasped.

"Is there a way out except up those steps and—" I started and stopped. No sound—but now we stood in the light—an incandescent almost above us blazed up suddenly. This was the end—one final, desperate battle. But I had a last card and I'd play it—perhaps this woman—this black head that hung mistily before me in the sudden glare was but a victim of the Black Circle. "If you breathe a word about my being here—then—beware the vengeance of the White Circle," I said harshly. Melodramatic, that—perhaps—but re-

member that this was a rather melodramatic situation.

I looked at the woman now—just a slip of a thing. In blue she was—in blue—a little dark head that almost rested on my shoulder. And I knew—knew before I lifted that head and looked straight into the wide, frightened eyes of Josey Mears. I didn't think of the danger above—my hands fell mechanically from her wrists—and she was gone—dashing up the steps—calling to some one above.

CHAPTER XI

THE BLACK CIRCLE

I CAME out of my trance—jarred back to reality—turned, and running around a great wooden partition was again in the darkness. A door slammed above—voices that trailed off to a distant hum—I was alone in the cellar—they were not coming down. The woman was afraid to speak then. The woman! Josey Mears—care-free, happy little flapper, I had always thought her.

And now—at the best she was working with this vile gang—dragged into it, a victim, perhaps—but in it and a part of it just the same. It made my blood run cold. It was the first time that I knew I had looked upon Josey as a little different from the others—as—but that was all over now. She had been in the house while men above her tore at the very soul of a woman.

And it was Josey and her note that had delivered Mrs. Clayburn into their hands. She had probably run into the cellar when the shooting became general.

Had she recognized me? Hardly—the white mask and cap completely hid my face and my voice had been

deep and gruff. The sweater, too—but time was passing. The girl would get over her fright—see the absurdity of fearing a single man, trapped like a rat in the cellar. A way out—that was what I must search for.

I worked rapidly now—no more cautious secrecy. Besides, if the windows were really boarded up no light from within would show to the watchers in the night. I would find just how well they were boarded. Out came my flash—hurriedly I made the rounds of the windows; strong, heavy boards with great bolts—why, it would take hours to tear them away. An ax might turn the trick quicker, but of course that would only invite immediate attack from both within and without. Each window I carefully inspected—no use—and I spied a distant black hole at the back of the coal bin.

Over the coal I crawled—stopping now and then to listen for the arrival of the enemy—apparently they trusted the girl; believed that no one was in the cellar. Perched perilously on top of the coal I gazed into the chute—no light from the distant sky—I slipped my torch in—made out nothing but emptiness—and then —a flat, wooden wall at the end of the passage. Was it the end? Did there seem to be a curve there—surely, this was not the place they put the coal in.

A hidden exit from the house—I thrilled at the thought—stuck my shoulders in—and hesitated. Once in there—caught in there, and all hope would be gone.

There was not room enough to turn around—even if it was a secret passage, mightn't the end of it be blocked? Wouldn't it surely be locked—or worse—perhaps guarded?

I'd—but no, I'd fight it out where I could be on my feet—not crawl for five minutes and stick my head into the night, to have some one crash it. Perhaps, after all, the girl would not tell—that was a possibility. But I'd be ready—so I slid back, drawing my head and shoulders out of that gloomy hole—yet I drew no coal dust with me.

Ruin! You'll have to take my word for it that my heart never missed a beat. Yet I knew that I was about to face death. The coal—did you ever hear it when it starts rolling—like thunder, it sounded now—rumbling and rattling from the top of the bin to the hard cement floor at the bottom. I might have known—might have guessed; but the thing was done.

They must have heard it all over that house. Would they believe that it was a natural occurrence, that happens every so often? Hardly, at a time like this. Even an easy-going householder takes a look, though he is more or less used to its slipping at strange, unaccountable times.

Somewhere above me a door closed with a bang—heavy feet trod across the floor—came a distant murmur of voices. Distant, was it—no—close to my ear—another voice that—an eerie, queer little voice. I turned again toward that black hole—the voice came

from there. Not distinctly, but understandable—no fancy. I stuck my ear close to the blackness of the chute.

"White Circle—this way—crawl through! White Circle—a friend—this way—crawl through." Several times the message was repeated—then stopped. Again it took up its cry—faint—ever calling the same words over and over.

Then it was drowned out—heavy feet were on the cellar steps—a gruff voice muttered, "Josey must be right."

And those were the last words I heard as I slipped into the black hole. Josey Mears had betrayed me.

The White Circle had called. Was it the little old man—was his far-reaching arm still protecting me? It gave me hope. Surely, if it were some trap those hurrying figures would not be coming down the stairs.

Desperately, painfully, I wiggled along—their first thought would be the coal bin—their second, the chute—their third, to get to the other end of that chute.

Footsteps were already in the coal when I reached the turn and slipping on my side, rounded it. Light ahead of me—a few feet, no more—pale light to be sure—and air—a clear breeze of the late fall. And now a brighter light behind me. Some one had shot a torch into the passage. But I was safe—faintly now, through some bush, I caught a flash of the moon.

A few more feet and I was in the open—drawing my feet after me on to the grass. A thick bush to the right gave me shelter while I got my bearings and looked for the voice that had bid me to liberty.

And the voice came—close behind me—near the house. The same voice, yes—but a trembling, frightened voice—the high pitched, choking note of a man in terror. "I only guarded the exit," it feebly said. I peered through the bush and saw him—clearly, in the moonlight.

It was the youth of the sallow face—not so sallow now—but a pasty white, that stood out clearly. Then he was blotted out—a huge shadow was between—gigantic shoulders—thick arms—and the figure spoke. I stood erect—a real thrill in the sound of that voice; it was the disguised, deep, guttural notes of the man whithin the house—the Black Circle himself.

"You have betrayed your trust—you have lied. I stood close by and heard you call—heard you distinctly whisper," and his voice lowered, "the White Circle. Fool—did you think that he was in the cellar—that being there he could hear you?" And the voice now shook with wrath. "Traitor!" It fairly spat the word.

A great arm went up—there was a flash of steel, a gruff curse, and a muttered groan. Too late I dashed from the bushes. The sallow youth had slumped to the ground.

My foot struck a projecting root—I half stumbled—caught myself and stood erect. But the man had heard—for he swung sharply around. Clearly in the moonlight we faced each other. I was looking at the one hundred thousand dollar face—but unfortunately it was masked. The White and Black Circles stood less than a foot apart.

His gun was jabbed close up against my chin—and there was no tremor in his voice as he spoke. Unknown faced unknown—yet with a bitter hatred.

"One move and you die—" he hesitated then. "Just the slightest pressure of my finger to send a bullet crashing into your throat." His lips smacked beneath the mask.

I hope that I was as calm as he when I spoke.

"You think only of yourself," I said slowly. "Do you fail to note that the slightest pressure of my finger will send a bullet crashing into your dirty, black heart?" To add to the statement, I dug my gun a bit deeper into his body.

His gun hand moved the fraction of an inch and that was all the emotion he showed. But the cards certainly were in his hands. Time was his ally—not mine. Strange the feeling I had then—a desire to kill—will power alone kept my finger from tightening on that trigger. It might have been my hatred for the man; it might have been the still body of the youth who would have helped me, and now lay at my feet—and again, it might have been Josey Mears—a sudden

gripping horror that she was in this beast's power.

A half minute passed—no more—but it seemed like hours. Fully I realized that I was playing directly into his hands. That at any moment those from the cellar would suspect the truth—swing around the corner of the house—see us there in the moonlight and—exit Stacey Lee, representative of the White Circle.

I was the first to break the impressive silence.

"We will meet again—" I took a step backward, my gun raised, my eyes upon his gun. "I am a remarkably fine shot," I went on, and meant it. "If you attempt to shoot, or cry out, I will press the trigger, come what may. Our lives—or our deaths—are locked together, for these few moments at least." Another step backward—would I trip over something—further and further I went. Hope now, a real hope of making the road and the thick woods beyond it. As for my car and Oscar—that seemed out of the question. I was on the wrong side of the house—my flight must lead in the same direction as that of Mrs. Clayburn.

Another step—two—three—a half dozen—all I needed was a start. Once away from that threatening gun I had as much chance as my pursuers. It would be a daring man, indeed, who would stalk me in those woods.

A shout—an answering call—the patter of hurrying feet, and the gun of the Black Circle spoke. Almost together we fired. I am not a killer but I am

not a target either. The next instant figures had swung into view. I turned, zigzagged across the open, found the trees, and cleared the wall. No other shots broke the stillness. A message in that.

To kill me the Black Circle would chance one shot on what he no doubt believed an even chance. But a fusillade of bullets would be dangerous to him. Why? The surrounding country was not as desolate as I thought.

But I held no such fears. Glancing around, I fired at two figures who seemed to clear the wall together. Some satisfaction in that—they dropped to the ground together and I was in the woods, dodging through the trees. A crash through thick bushes—and I saw the road—just before me, too, the red tail-light of a car. Oscar? I opened my mouth to call, hesitated, dropped back in the bushes and skirted along—crouched low—well within the shadows. There was a whistle or two and an occasional shout. But if that was Oscar I was safe. Faintly only could I make out the shape of the car there in the shadow.

The car was moving, slipping out from the side of the road hardly ten yards from me. Tired, gasping for breath, my gun clutched in my hand, I raced after it. Distinctly I heard the gear slip from low to second, then high. The machine was hurrying away from danger. Had it been my shot that caused it? Now in the moonlight I recognized the car, made one final

effort, dashed out upon the road and, lurching forward, grasped the tightly bound rim of the spare tire on the rear and swung up, easing my body into it. A tight fit, but I had done the same thing before. I was safe.

CHAPTER XII

A RIDE THROUGH THE NIGHT

THERE was no slackening of speed as I eased into the tight fitting, circular rim on the back of the car. They didn't see me, of course. I was with the best of friends. It was the red touring—Mrs. Clayburn's car. She must have been giving orders to the chauffeur; that was why she did not look behind, and the driver had his hands full at the wheel. This would be a surprise for the little lady in yellow. Just a chance to get my breath, be sure we were entirely out of danger and I'd call to her.

What was the car doing there? Why didn't it go on as I had directed? A breakdown? Hardly. Waiting for me? That might be; she had shown herself a plucky little thing when I sent her out the door. But why the sudden flight when I needed her most? Still she could not know that I was coming.

Useless to bother about such a question now; in a few minutes she would explain everything herself. It wasn't the little woman in yellow that kept bobbing up in my head, but the girl in blue. Josey Mears a crook; the meanest kind of a crook! If the police had sud-

denly swept down on that house in Crestwood, she as well as the Black Circle would be in the hands of the law. And what a haul they would have made this night! I'd speak to the little old man, the White Circle, about that.

A few minutes more now and I'd be riding back to town like a gentleman. Easy? Things had worked out well, or fairly well. If I had not caught my foot in that root, I would have seen the Black Circle's face sure, just ripped off the mask. I excused that error, put it down to over anxiety. I wanted to save the life of the youth who had helped me; and why had he helped me? I sighed. Excuses are all right, but two years ago that break never would have happened and, oh, one hundred thousand dollars is a lot of money.

We were making time now, traveling far off toward White Plains. Why didn't they cut over to Central Avenue and double back to the city? It looked like I'd have to take charge, every minute the car was gathering speed, the roads were not of the best and my position was a perilous one.

Chug! Sput! The car jerked and jarred along, turned sharply from the broad road and bounced into a little lane. I distinctly heard Mrs. Clayburn gasp, another jar, a bump, and the red touring car stopped around a curve in the shadow of huge trees.

Good! I dropped from the back and took a stretch. Why the stop? Engine trouble? Pursuit? But I had

seen nothing. Then the shrill voice of Mrs. Clayburn.

"Duncan, what is this, what has happened?" There was an anxious, frightened note in her voice. She had been through a great deal.

"The engine, madam. A minute; no more. I thought perhaps the side road would be best, out of sight." His voice was low, respectful, and yet I felt there was a touch of familiar understanding in the soft whisper.

"The back seat, madam. My wrench is there. May I trouble you?" he was by the door now, I heard him open it, felt the car give slightly as Mrs. Clayburn came to her feet, heard her sharp intake of breath and peered around the side.

"Come! Get out of there, you." The man's hand shot in and clutched her by the wrist, dragging her roughly from the car, out upon the road half on her knees, half sitting on the ground. "Give me them letters, you—" a foul name. "Yes, I worked with them, stole the letters the first time. Come! I seen you stick 'em in your waist. Out with the letters or I'll drag them out."

A pitiful little cry, a weak, hopeless appeal, and—

"Duncan—you, Duncan—spare me. I've always been good to—"

"The letters!" He dragged the woman to her feet, holding her with one powerful arm. She fought, clutched at her bosom, scratched at the face of the now infuriated man.

"You foul slut." His hand came up, paused in midair before he struck and stayed there. That was all of that.

I have other things beside a quick trigger finger. As I said, I'm a strong man and always in condition. This was not the time for gunplay. If you had been an adventurer as many years as I, you'd understand the feeling of pride in the work, the dangers of a gun under certain conditions. It's pretty hard to draw a bead on a lad who's about to strike a woman, and not press the trigger. Then again, he might strike and— Oh, I just stepped out, clutched him by the collar and swung him around, facing me.

He had guts, had Duncan; more than you'd expect in a woman beater. He finished his blow by letting me have it. It was short, lacked force, and the muscles must have tightened under the shock of my sudden appearance; besides, he looked straight into two slitlike eyes that peered through the whiteness of a somewhat soiled mask.

Then I gave it to him. That was my excuse, that blow of his that grazed my ear, not damaging, but stinging slightly. And I struck with all the force of my hundred and eighty pounds of hardened muscle. Flush on the button he took it, clicked his heels together like a soldier, stared vacantly into space and went down like a clothing store dummy. It was a pretty blow. I nodded at that. Not conceited, you

understand. You take pride in your business, I take pride in mine. A thorough job in any line gives one a certain feeling of satisfaction.

Duncan was out. Lucky that, for Mrs. Clayburn was clinging to me now, weeping softly, hysterically.

"Again, again," she kept muttering over and over as I took her hands from my neck and placed her gently on the step of the car. Women are funny creatures. She recovered almost at once, came to her feet, looked behind her and shuddered.

"Hurry! Let us get away. I can drive the car, quick, they may be coming."

Not complimentary to me, that, and yet a sensible thought. Personally, I was willing to call it a night. There had been enough action to satisfy even me. I understood, too, the reference to the letters back there at the house, the hope that they were still safe. Another slip on my part. Certainly I should have suspected the chauffeur, all alone in the car, out before the house, the final link in a wonderfully made chain. The ace in the hole, the sure chance of victory in the face of defeat. But the woman was at me again, thanking, pleading, begging me to go on.

"We have two things to do first," I told her. "After all, you and I are but pawns in a big game. Here, take my light." I slipped the flash into her nervous fingers. "Examine those letters; be sure they're all there, then we'll burn them. Hurry, I have a little business with Duncan."

For the first time, I didn't find the sticking of that seal a childish occupation. There was a sort of grim humor to it. And this time, in the brightness of the moon, the white stood out clearly against the red. I was none too gentle as I slapped it on. Duncan stirred restlessly as I struck, half opened his eyes and turned his head from side to side. Then I frisked him for his gun; as for tying him up, I didn't bother. And I made a threat, not a bluff, nothing to do with the White Circle. This was entirely a personal matter.

"Duncan," I said slowly, making sure that each word went home. "You've got your chance to get clean away. If we meet again," I studied that face long and earnestly, "we meet in death." Dramatic? Cheap stuff? Maybe, but I meant it then. Somehow, I had taken a violent dislike to Duncan.

Through the haze Duncan understood. I just turned my back on him and walked over to Mrs. Clayburn.

"The right letters?" I ask her, and when she nods through her sobs—those letters do not bring back pleasant memories—"Burn them now!"

It don't take me a minute to get a little fire blazing. One by one the letters go into it. And Duncan sees and understands. They won't be bothering Mrs. Clayburn any more. Then I ground the still smoking embers beneath my feet, stamped them well into the dirt and helped Mrs. Clayburn into the back of the car.

"I'll drive," I tell her.

Twice, through the corner of my eyes, I've seen Duncan half sit up, only to fall back again. Am I careless in taking the chance that he might attack? I don't know. He's had his warning.

A moment more—a last look at the blackened fire and Duncan—and I'm in the front seat. Back down the narrow lane we slip—out on to the highway and speeding along. In silence we travel, and reaching a crossroad, I slip over it, turn into Central Avenue, by Hartsdale, and skip toward the city. My mask—it's got to come off.

Oscar! I don't worry about him. I daresay, at the first shot he started home. At least he was far enough from the dismal house, and Oscar is to be depended on in an emergency. Stolid, faithful, practical Oscar—who never saw romance or adventure, and who was absolutely devoid of imagination. Would he resign in the morning? And the girl in blue!

Too late I saw the flash of yellow as the woman behind climbed into the front seat beside me. I pulled my cap well down. This wasn't playing the game. I hadn't warned her to stay in the back—never thought. But she was speaking.

"I'm not going to try and—and identify you." Her voice was hardly more than a whisper. "I want to thank you—and the baby waiting for me at home!" A choke—a sob—silence.

I switched the subject quickly—head bent low.

"What were you doing—why were you waiting there by the house? Wouldn't—Duncan drive on?"

"Oh, yes." She wiped away her tears. "I just had to stay—you—the White Circle, you know—such danger for you."

I nodded.

"And the letters—why didn't you destroy them—tear them to pieces?"

"I couldn't." Her voice was very faint. "I wanted to keep them—oh, it never could happen again—but if ever I was tempted—why, I could read them and see—understand what a fool I'd been—what a bad, wicked mother."

No sense to that, you think. And you're right. But it's the way of some women. Why argue—the thing was done—the letters were destroyed.

She gave me directions to her home, told me that her husband would never suspect anything. It was three o'clock.

"I often stay late at such—affairs. Sometimes he's asleep—sometimes he's busy at his work. He never goes out with me." No rebuke in her words—just the faintest intake of breath. Yet you don't have to be a student of human nature to see the whole sordid story of a wrecked life in those few simple lines.

She held my hand a long time at parting—tightly clutched it in her two little ones. Nothing of the

flirtation of a woman of the world there—just the clinging thankfulness of a child. She was gone, running up the steps and passing through the front door of the house in the upper Nineties.

CHAPTER XIII

TWO TELEPHONE CALLS

I DROVE on, parked her car in the garage two blocks away, and walked home. The air was brisk—the night, cloudless—and my work was finished. Work! Was it? Yet I would be paid for it. And the pounding at my heart was new to me. Something that choked up and swelled in my throat. I had dragged a woman's soul straight from the depths of hell. A great happiness that—and yet—one thing sung continuously in my ears—What of Josey Mears?

I braced my shoulders—walked faster—turned in at my own house. Such thoughts were not for me. I had never been a one-woman man—nor a two or a three; or any other number for that matter.

Click—my key was hardly in the lock when a light blazed up within and the door swung open. I half clutched for my gun—looked up—started slightly—and laughed. Placid, quiet, unemotional Oscar stood in the doorway.

"Some one on the telephone—you're just in time," he said quietly, as if I had but stepped out for a walk.

I took the call on the downstairs phone. It was the little old man. I wanted to break it to him—give him

the good news that I had succeeded—but he already knew. Remarkable that. Here I was just in the house and the White Circle was congratulating me on my success. He was even aware that Mrs. Clayburn had returned safely to her home.

Had unseen eyes watched through the night? Hardly—eyes that watched at Crestwood could not have watched by Mrs. Clayburn's door. I was startled—yes, but I got a few important things off my chest.

"About this White Circle business," I told him, "it's bad stuff in some cases. Now, if a man could use his own judgment—like to-night—why not keep the whole thing secret; hunt them down—find the leader without his being aware—?"

"No." His voice broke in upon me. "Such are the orders of the White Circle." He spoke as if he talked for another. "And the reason—" a moment's hesitation, and then, "not simply the psychology of the thing upon those whom he employs, nor the fear instilled by the steady activities of the White Circle. I do not believe that we will ever discover him, but I do believe that, driven to—well, perhaps in his pride, his hate, or the loss of some victim, he will hunt out us—hunt out the White Circle.

"From the defensive he will take the offensive. To-night you have done good work. Already consternation is in the enemy's camp. They cry out for vengeance."

"Have it your way then." I still thought my idea

of working secretly and without so much bally-hoo the best. "You may succeed better than you think. To-night I heard the man I think to be the leader threaten —well—you."

"Just how?" The dry old lips smacked over the wire.

And I told him. I'm not one to beat around the bush.

"He said the White Circle was a joke but that it had gone too far—and referred to you."

"Just how did he refer to me?"

A fair question, and I gave him a fair answer.

"He spoke of 'the old fool.'" I repeated the exact words. Of course, from the Black Circle's point of view there was only one conclusion to draw. These blackmailers were in on the know—suspected the little old man, to a certain extent anyway.

There was a soft chuckle. That was the first time I heard him laugh.

"Perhaps he is right. But I would ask nothing better than to meet this scoundrel face to face."

Courage enough? Yes—but fool talk for an old man.

"He's a tough customer—don't just sit back and watch, but is ready to act when the time comes. I just wish to warn you."

"It is good." His voice was free from the slightest tremor. "And the check—yes—you shall have a good one. To-morrow night I will bring it to you—and

another case. A man this time—not much difficulty, I think. Just tact and foresight. This time we shall work together. If there is trouble, then I shall count on you."

"Good enough." I was feeling the lure of this man-hunt, myself. "Take care of yourself," I told him again—somehow, I had a presentiment of evil. But who wouldn't after such a night?

"I'm an old man." He spoke very low, yet very firm. "Every hour I walk in the shadow of death, and it is not the hand of man which directs me."

That was all—just the faintest click as the receiver snapped into place. Our conversation was over. He had given me no address, no telephone number. But I shrugged my shoulders. After all, it was his game to play in his own way—still, I was the power that drove the machinery he had constructed.

No dreams disturbed me. I slept as peacefully as a new-born babe. You'll admit I deserved my rest—just a face, nothing more mistily before me—a slightly turned-up nose—a wealth of bobbed, black hair and two sparkling brown eyes.

Morning! A cold tub, a hearty breakfast, and I was ready for a new day—one of loafing in particular—that was my idea as I dressed—and then the phone. It has been incessant lately in its ringing—appearing at the clubs again had convinced my many acquaintances that I was not entirely out of the running. Nice

people! "Them that has, gets," was coined for that set.

A feminine voice—I recognized it at once. Got a sort of a thrill—half hopeful, quarter repugnant—and all interest. I just couldn't wipe out the childish innocence of Josey Mears.

"I was mean to you last night, wasn't I—Stacey." My first name slipped hesitatingly from her lips. "But don't be a cross boy. I'm sorry I was such a frump—perhaps I'll see you again—maybe."

"For lunch, if you like." This came spontaneously—but it was in my contract. Josey Mears was in the enemy's camp—Josey Mears might lead me to the hundred thousand dollar face—and Josey Mears was—well, Josey Mears—if you can make anything out of that.

Her free, easy, girlish laugh came humming over the wire.

"You're a dear," she said softly, "and I'm frightfully hungry—say one o'clock at—" Her voice trailed off to nothing.

"At your apartment—first," I suggested.

There was a delay in her answer—then:

"No—it's a fright. Silly—but I'm a woman. Say, Holiday's."

Tiny tables, shaded lamps, hidden corners.

"Holiday's it is," I told her.

"One o'clock," she returned. "You're very forgiving. I wish I had your disposition. But there's the

doorbell and—oh—" A moment's pause; was there a touch of surprise in her voice—a tremble perhaps—and did I hear across the wires of the city streets the faintest thud of a closing door? I don't know. But distinctly I did catch the soft grating of the receiver on its hook before the click of a disconnected wire came clearly to me. Josey Mears had hung up—suddenly—but slowly and noiselessly. Why?

I shrugged my shoulders. Josey was bright—Josey had brains—and Josey had chosen her own bed. If it was not one of roses, why—then the thorns would have to prick. Oh, I gave consideration to the fact that she might be an unwilling victim, like Mrs. Clayburn. If so, where were the hollow eyes—the deep black rims—the trembling, frightened lips—that indescribable horror of the whole thing? Nowhere in Josey's make-up, that was sure.

Again, why did she ring me up? I had known Josey slightly for the best part of two years, met her at different affairs, been chummy with her perhaps. We had much in common. At least, our sense of humor ran along the same lines. There was many a laugh at the petty tragedies of the social puppets.

An evening here and an evening there. That was all—nothing on the outside—no tête-à-tête business—nor even a walk in the park. Once I had taken her home, when her taxi failed to show up. A raised hat—a quiet good night—nothing more.

I paced the room, thinking. Could I possibly be

game for these blackmailers? Was there anything in the life of Stacey Lee that would interest them? Lots, perhaps, for a social climber to fear—but as for money—why, the only reason that much of my adventurous career had not appeared in the magazine sections of the papers was because the pay did not seem—well, we all have our pride. A single girl, with a past, is open for prey to these vultures—while a single man, with a past, is simply interesting.

Josey might be slated to sound me out. They did not know if I had money—the sudden advance in my social status had marked me, perhaps, as future game. And Josey's acquaintance was an easy road to information. Good enough—nothing would suit me better. I might even drum up a few wives whom I had inadvertently neglected to divorce, and give the Black Circle a decent run for their money.

The day was cloudy, with a promise of rain before the afternoon, when I made my way to The Antlers Club—exclusive club, that—the best of the best. My introduction was received through a head waiter. A bank roll and the will to use it were the requirements. A good system, I dare say, for the club flourished—showed a profit at the end of each year.

It was almost impossible to believe that an organization like the Black Circle could exist there in the heart of the world's greatest city. Masses of people passed before the club window—tall, broad-shouldered guardians of the law stood majestically guiding the traffic

by a simple raising of the hand. And there—under the very noses of these cogs of the powerful police system, slinking, haggard-faced people, victims of a great criminal organization, passed.

CHAPTER XIV

A FLAT AFTERNOON

TWELVE-THIRTY—and the rain came. Great torrents of it bore down upon the streets, cleansing it of the frozen, dirty snow of a few weeks before, and clearing it too of people. The dense mass of a few minutes before was now a hurrying, scraggling line. Was it the rain that made me think of Josey—or was it the faintest sound of that closing door that had drifted over the city streets? At any rate I decided to call for her at her apartment.

A decision with me is action. A quick, deft tuck to my coat—the reassuring feel of a heavy revolver—and I was out the door and entering a taxi. Ten minutes later we drew up at the six-story apartment house.

The taxi waited—a dollar in the hand of the elevator boy and a jesting dig in the ribs earned me the right to ascend to the fifth floor unannounced.

"Miss Mears will be expecting me," was all that I said, and quite enough. The boy understood—too well, I thought. Had others—but 5-D was the number and I stood before the door as the elevator descended.

Did voices come from within? Was one a mascu-

line voice, raised in anger—and did I, too, hear a half defiant, pleading little voice that provoked a threat? I don't know. I didn't wait. Ignoring the bell I raised my closed fist and brought it sharply down, three times, upon the heavy oak paneling.

Silence—a movement of feet—a pause—another wait and the door opened the tiniest crack.

"Gave you a start, eh?" I laughed, thrust open the door and stood in the hallway. Josey for once was surprised—and the natural redness of her cheeks was missing.

"Raining out," I told her. "Ready—still hungry? And—why, the apartment is perfect."

Had I overdone it? Josey, always so sure of herself—always so poised—was in a panic as I stepped into the living room. For a moment I wished I hadn't come. It was weird to see Josey like that. Was it my sudden appearance or something that had gone before? I had hardly saved her from a trying ordeal, for there was no relief in her face—no sense of dawning security in my presence.

If I had wanted to startle the great calm and self-assurance of this bit of a girl, I had succeeded beyond my wildest hope. I couldn't look at her. To do so and not question the reason of her paleness of face, uncertainty of limbs, as she leaned against the wall, would surely arouse suspicion later when she recovered enough to think clearly.

"Slip into your wraps," I told her easily as I dropped

into a chair, half turned it so as to be sidewise to drawn curtains. Twice the curtains swayed; a draft perhaps —and yet I felt no breeze. Of a certainty eyes were watching me—a lurking figure slunk behind that drapery. Uncomfortable for Josey—my coming like that. Maybe. But I gave myself a bad three minutes also. I knew who Josey's friends were—knew that some one stood behind that curtain—wondered, too, if it were one that could possibly connect me up with events of the previous evening.

Had I disguised my voice then? For the life of me I didn't know. I was beginning to be a novice in this game. A laugh there—I picked a book from the table and slowly thumbed the pages. Just had to do something with my hands—the temptation to dash between those waving curtains was hard to resist. Think of it—cold-blooded, heartless murder—and yet— Josey had returned. I dare say we both sighed with relief.

A red was on her cheeks—simple of explanation, that —but the sparkle to her eyes was missing as she stretched out a tiny hand to me. The light banter of her voice lost some of its naturalness as her cold, damp fingers tightened unconsciously about mine. A moment later the door closed behind us, the marble floor rang beneath our feet, and the buzz of the elevator bell echoed up the shaft. For the first time Josey talked—really talked.

"I'm so glad that's over and we're out," she started in, as she shot those great brown eyes up at me. "You

notice so much—and that front room behind the curtain—it's a fright—I paint, you know." She offered the final in explanation.

"You don't look it, Josey." I smiled straight down on that—yep—sweet young face. I can read faces, too—nothing of bad there and—

"Horrid." The hand that reached up and pulled my ear was not so cold now. "If we weren't in the elevator —I'd box your ears," she whispered.

And I—silly perhaps—but that was the sort of conversation I wished to encourage for awhile. Josey mustn't know—mustn't suspect that I saw anything strange in her actions. If she was to lead me into a trap—why, I was willing to be led.

So we chatted inanely of nothing as we skidded over the slippery pavements to Holiday's. Somehow, I had a new interest in Josey—the paleness of those cheeks, the trembling, shaking little body. The bed was certainly not of roses then—and why had my appearance so affected her? I looked at her now—a wonderful little slip of a thing. A tiny table in a distant corner—the dimness of lights—the independence of that little turned-up nose.

Decidedly, Josey had personality. There was character even to the saucy tilt of the nose—and the sparkle of her eyes was back again. I forgot the Black Circle —neglected my duty to the White—business was off. I declared it a holiday. My interest was entirely in the girl across the table. The lights were low, the food

good—the girl vivacious and—most of all, entertaining.

Somehow I think that Josey took the same attitude. We were young and this was life. We had a great deal in common. Again—Josey was simply Josey, and you can make what you want to of that.

Just the lure of the girl—a feeling strange to me—something of that romance I derided. I looked long and steadily at her—a girl that a man would fight his way to—and the spell was broken—Josey was talking.

"I often wonder about you, Stacey—gossip, you know—yet nothing is ever said. What is your business? What—is your—oh, past—we all have a past."

The light banter of her voice didn't register. It was as if she said: "Are you worth cultivating? Have you got the money? Have you done anything that you'd pay to keep quiet?"

If there was ever a time when anything could be read on my face that was it. A second only and I was playing poker. There was no hardness in my eyes as I looked at Josey—no nervousness to my fingers as I lighted a cigar and held for a moment the dying match between my fingers. Steady! I smiled over at her.

But I didn't lie. Didn't give her a wild story of abandoned wives—or indiscreet letters written to the charming wives of old but wealthy husbands. Somehow, I couldn't. I was careful of course—suspicious, too, but the loathing I expected wasn't there. A pity for the girl, perhaps; a deeper hatred for those who

had made of her a creature of that other world, certainly.

"I used to be an actress," she went on—her eyes on mine. "Not a great one—just a hopeful one—now I paint a bit—you see, I received a legacy which makes me nearly independent."

I nodded. I guess I knew where that legacy came from—blood money. She hoped for a return of my confidence. I could see it in the expectant, eager thrust of her chin above the table.

"Me, too," I told her. "Used to be an actor—got a legacy—a small one—a broker now—dabbling a bit in stocks." It would be to the interest of the White Circle to lead her on, yet I didn't. Just couldn't. Explain that? Can't. Didn't want her to play any part in my end of it, I guess. And when the time came for a show-down, why, Josey could have a new lease on life—alone.

I didn't want any part of a woman who could look you so straight in the eyes and plan to squeeze a few dollars out of your soul. Not me! Despite it all I'll admit I liked the kid, but there was a feeling, too, that I'd like her better at a distance. She had personality—she had character. But was it good character, if you get what I mean.

Josey overworked it. She was too insistent. So I gave her the sign to lay off.

"Drop it, Josey," I said. "If you're bent on starting a social register, look me up in *Who's Who.*" And

that knocked her, brought her hand to her chin and knitted her eyes.

Things were flat over the coffee, and I guess we both were glad to leave. The rain had stopped and the streets were dry. We decided to walk and we did, close enough together, but plodding along in silence. To see us you might think we had been married for years. It was getting to be what is known as a dead afternoon.

The clouds came and blotted out the sun. Up Fifth Avenue we strolled until we hit the park.

"Are you busy?" Her voice seemed very far away as we stood there by the gate across from the Plaza.

"No," was all I answered, and despite a drip of rain we turned into the park, shot off the main highway and down toward the lake. Did she take the lead or did I? I don't know. We were about as far apart as the poles. Yet we both wanted something from the other. She wanted my past, my life. I wanted, oh, I wanted something, I guess. It couldn't just be her company.

CHAPTER XV

ROMANCE DASHES IN

We were down by the very edge of the lake when she turned on me suddenly. The clouds opened, the rain came, and neither of us noticed it, or bothered with it. Her hands were raised, tightly gripping at my shoulders; her chin was on my chest, her brown eyes questioning, demanding, pleading.

"Stacey! Stacey! Tell me something about yourself, your past, your life now. I must know." Josey had thrown all caution to the wind. My thoughts went back to those voices when I stood by her apartment door. A cruel master, the Black Circle, then. She had been given a job to fill.

What was the price of failure? What threat did they hang above this little black head? Here was a different Josey. There was fear as well as pleading in her voice. For the first time I saw the horror in those deep brown eyes, the same hopeless look that I had read so plainly in the eyes of Mrs. Clayburn.

When I did not answer Josey shook my shoulders. The rain fell in torrents, dripping streams from my soft hat upon her upturned face, making little rivulets

of white through the rouge. And Josey had never before used rouge.

"Tell me, tell me, Stacey," she repeated over and over again in a deadly earnestness. "I must know, I must know."

"We all have our skeletons," I tried to smile down on her. Poor kid, if she was frightened like that why, I'd give her something to take back to them. "What's come over you, Josey? Why do you ask? Have you some trouble, something that I can—well, help you out of?" Nothing in my mind now but a great pity and an opening for her.

"Me—me! Do you think that I am thinking of myself?" The eyes came wide open. "No, don't think that. Oh, Stacey—"

Throw in an empty space. I can't write it. How it happened, why it happened. But it was done in a moment. Soft, wet hair had brushed my cheek, great eyes had opened up fathomless wonders to me. Arms were around my neck, I held her lithe young body close and our lips met. Just love, nothing more. I guess I acted like a fool and told Josey so over and over. Yet it didn't seem new to me but like I had known it all along. It was the same with Josey, too.

"I've always loved you, Stacey—always—always." She just clung to me. Right in the heart of the city, we were. Those in the windows of the big hotel or the New York Athletic Club must have grabbed some eye-

ful, but as far as I was concerned we might have been in the middle of an African jungle.

"You'll always think of me, Stacey, always remember that I really love you, though you're far away."

That was an easy promise and I didn't hesitate to give it. I had no intention of being far away. Not me.

"And you'd do anything for me?" Her voice was pitifully low and weak.

I gulped, held her the tighter a moment, and set her back on the ground. The truth was coming out now, she wanted to break with those vultures, she wanted me to help her. Good, I guess that murder was in my heart when I answered.

"I'll do anything for you, Josey, anything." And then, the caution of years of training, perhaps the words of the little old man ringing in my head: "Anything that an honorable man can do." Just a stock phrase in this case, but for once they were words of wisdom.

"You must promise to leave the country." Her eyes, two deep, frightened balls of fire, were steadily searching mine.

"I can't, Josey, I can't." I spoke rapidly. "What of you, you need me here. And why, why should I go away?"

She sighed, paused and then:

"I cannot tell you, it is a trust of another. I only

ask that you leave the country—at once—travel—any place—but get away from the city—now."

I shook my head. Then an idea, an inspiration. I had a duty to the White Circle, of course, but my first duty was to Josey, the woman I loved. If I could take her away!

"Josey," I held her at arm's length, "will you marry me—to-morrow—leave the country with me. You say that you love me."

I thought that the word "yes" was forming on her lips, but no word came. Then the arms that I held were free, flung about my neck, her lips touched mine, and she was gone without a word, speeding over the wet grass, onto the path and up to the road. Came the creak of worn wheels, the sudden stop of a cruising taxi and Josey was out of my paradise and into the city.

Had I made a promise? Had Josey agreed to go with me? And would the word "coward" be stamped upon Stacey Lee for the first time? Was I deserting a good cause, breaking faith with the little old man? A question there. I was working for pay, had performed my first task well. After all, I had promised nothing to the White Circle, nor to Josey either for that matter. I had simply asked her a question, a question that she did not answer. Couldn't I do more to save her by staying in the city, running the leader of her organization to earth?

And did they suspect me? Was Josey trying to save me from their vengeance? Josey had not betrayed me the night before. She had not recognized me. Of that much I was certain. She loved me and—a step, a shadow from behind the boat-house. I turned sharply, saw the figure disappear on the off side. There was something familiar about the hunch of those shoulders; I followed.

The man had either noticed that I saw him or was innocent of any evil purpose there. For he whistled a half forgotten ballad as he strolled out into the teeming rain and stood beside the lake. I came up behind him and he turned around.

The recognition was not mutual, for I had worn a mask the night before. But this was the lad who had stood with arms folded while Mrs. Clayburn was crouched in the chair and I peered through the drawn curtains of the lower room in that dismal house at Crestwood.

"Ah!" he smiled. "Another student who admires nature. Not in the sunlight is the lake most beautiful, but during the storm, when the myriad of raindrops fall like soldiers at a drill. The lake, to me, is the most beautiful thing in nature." Indifferent to my searching eyes he turned, and extending both hands far apart, gazed out over the lake.

Of course, he had spied upon us, snickered at the tragedy hidden in our new found love. With what result, I did not know, did not care at that moment.

Anger is not a part of my make-up, sudden passion, new to me, but then so was love. But if he admired the lake so much, let him drink his fill of it.

I just took him by the back of the neck and threw him into it. No white seal was stuck on this bird. This was pleasure, not business. If he had a story to repeat to the Black Circle, he might as well make it a good one. There's plenty of fun in life if you only have the will to see it.

He hadn't made any suicide pact with any one, not him, for as I backed up the grass and up on the path, he disappeared again behind the boathouse. Which all goes to show that if you pay ten dollars a day for a room in the Plaza, you sometimes get your money's worth out of it.

Strange thoughts, suspicions, and Josey Mears in them. I'll admit I had them all. I've got a head as well as a heart, but I loved Josey and would fight to save her—even from herself. As for the Black Circle, I'd fill it as full of holes as a porous plaster; there was a personal interest in it now. And listen to this—call it love—call it downright thick-headedness, or lay it to a desire to die young—I believed in Josey Mears, at least as far as her love for me was concerned.

Back to the club again, wet clothes and all. I wanted time to think, and my little window there was the place for it. Just stare out over the heads of the people, and day dream, good stuff sometimes. Thinking, as a

rule, don't pay much, but here—well, there was nothing else to do. The club would be deserted now.

And it wasn't. I couldn't have found a worse companion for my piece of mind. Did you guess it—the old bore himself. Robert T. Townsend—all of him. See me? I was hardly in the door when his right hand brushed his forehead and his left stroked his chin. That was his warning signal. And with it he lighted on me.

"Just the man, believe it or not," he started in, as he led me to a chair over near the dying embers of the lunch time fire. Mrs. Townsend was set on it, too."

I tried to head him off.

"Dead tired and wet." I don't think I was any too cordial. "Dropped in for quiet and rest."

"Me, too," he agreed as usual. "Just the place for it, here by the fire. I was soaked a few minutes ago, and tired, but now—" He pushed me into a chair, dragged another opposite and began to talk on the stock market. Not advice, exactly, not anything. I guess, the hum of his voice was all I got after a bit. My thoughts were far away.

"Damn it, what was that?" The sharpness of his voice, the scraping of his chair, brought me upright. I swung around, an attendant had passed behind us. So, I smiled to myself. Robert T. Townsend had nerves of his own. That was some satisfaction; he didn't just play upon the nerves of others.

"Ought to make them wear something beside rubber

soles; slip right up on, but—" his long arm came over and patted my knee—"you're just the man, as I said. Dinner party to-morrow night. One man disappointed us. Wife says, 'there's that Mr. Lee. I'm sure he'll help us out and fill in.' " Then leaning a bit nearer: " 'Most attractive young man,' she added. 'Head our dinner list after this.' " Once again the old bore was waiting for me to fall down on my knees with delight.

I was about to put the damper on the whole show, tell him to run out and bury his face; that any one would be glad to lend him a spade—when he shot in again. And this time he said something, not just talk.

"You'll take in Miss Mears, Josey Mears." I was at the receiving end of a dig in the ribs from pudgy fingers. "Lucky dog. I told the wife you must have arranged Charlie's sickness. Saw you dancing with her, but what say, nothing on for to-morrow, eh?" His eyes closed slightly, mean little eyes they were then, and he kind of wet his thick lips. Something like an animal, Townsend, big, good-natured enough if his stomach was full and business going right, I guess, but a selfish brute.

This time I coddled to his idea. Came out of my trance with a vengeance and made a play for his good will. Where Townsend's crowd went, so would Josey Mears. And where Josey Mears was—but enough. For the best part of an hour I chatted with Townsend —actually had him listening for a change. Big game

hunting in Africa—some imagination to be sure—but I gave the dear old bore some real thrills. Women were his long suit, he told me with a wink. Now laugh that one off.

CHAPTER XVI

A MESSAGE FROM THE BLACK CIRCLE

This time he went first, and his clamlike hand lingered in mine as his long, heavy arm pump-handled away. I was in strong. I dare say no one had listened to him or stood for him so long before. He was my friend for life now, if he had any pull with his wife—but such is life—less than two hours, two awful hours, to be sure, had turned the trick.

Love, adventure, society, murder lurking in the background. And I had thought of shaking the dust of the city from my feet to get a thrill! Man, I was having all kinds of thrills. Good stuff, as a rule, but love; I'd prefer to take that dose spending a quiet honeymoon on the deck of some great ocean greyhound. When a man's ready to get married, he's ready to settle down.

Here I was, just starting out. Why, it was like kissing the bride at the altar and going to the front line trenches and then finding the bride sitting there, up to her neck in mud and water.

Oscar had an unconscious way of letting me know when he had visitors. His cadaverous appearance took on a more death-like aspect than usual, which was some-

thing for Oscar. Guess he got the habit from the pile of creditors that had been making of my house a sort of rendezvous for the "meet your neighbor" movement among the tradesmen.

"A gentleman inside, *monsieur*." He emphasized the "gentleman" to such a degree that I knew at once the visitor's right to such a distinction was open to question. But I passed into the little front room and took in my visitor.

His clothes marked him the gentleman—the rest of him, anything but—in a way he was the counterpart of the sallow youth whom the Black Circle stabbed the previous night. A little taller, a little older, and perhaps longer a criminal. The grin on his face was something that I had decided to wipe off before ever he opened his mouth.

I knew his breed. You could drag a net through any hotel lounging room and grab yourself off a dozen or more. He was marking time for the penitentiary, was this bird. But not a real gunman. Physical violence was not in his line, that is, from his point of view.

"I am most unfortunately the bearer of bad news." He bowed very low, then sat down again. I guess sitting down came natural to him; safety first. People get used to using their feet on his type. He was already labeled. But he came right to the point.

"You are," he said, "in love with another man's wife." And as he spoke his hand sought his coat

pocket. Bad move that. I knew then that he caressed a gun, though he had neither the hand nor the eye to use it.

I smiled to myself. The Black Circle had already marked me for a victim. I knew it the minute I spotted this duck. He was the typical fixer. And I was supposed to fly into a rage and act high and mighty, threaten to kick him out. He knew the line, and so the gun for protection.

But I just nodded.

"I am perhaps in love with several men's wives," I told him easily. "In fact, for all you know, I may make a practice of it." I was sizing him up, thinking, too. Was this what Josey Mears had tried to warn me against? And who was the woman? One thing they couldn't do—that was to hang a dame on me.

And Skinny Face is surprised. This isn't on his list. I don't do the usual stuff. He's stuck for a minute, half draws his hand from his pocket and goes on with his speech.

"I feel for you." He gets it out slow. "I am simply an agent, one who bears a message. Others are in possession of your secret. My card." He shoved over a bit of pasteboard.

"Meyer & Meyer—Attorneys at Law."

I whistled softly. Here was a rather high-handed bit of business. Still the name might be fictitious. Anything pertaining to the activities of the Black Circle was of importance, so I put it in my pocket.

"And now what?" I asked easily.

"Meyer & Meyer will protect your interest in this rude attempt by some one to blackmail you. We will want a retainer, of course. And I presume you would rather settle than have the whole thing become public. They are hard people to deal with. We hope to pull you through with the least possible expense."

His eyes regarded me shrewdly a moment. "There is the law, of course, a most unpleasant way, to be sure. Still, we will be glad to fight these people openly, but the interest of our clients comes first."

Clever! Yes, in a way, you've got to admit that. Meyer & Meyer would fight the case, simply fight it, and you'd pay for their doing nothing but proceeding against "people unknown."

"How did you hear of me?" I was certainly interested.

"Telephoned less than an hour ago. Told that Mr. Stacey Lee was badly in need of some legal advice. Shall we say a hundred, just to show good faith? We shall submit the best figure we can obtain to you later."

"And if I prefer to sit tight?" I eyed him carefully, especially the hand by the gun.

"That, sir, is your privilege. We are not in need of business. But this husband is a foreigner. Will make trouble. Real physical danger. Besides, there is the unpleasant notoriety. From the tone of things, I think

we can settle rather—well, inexpensively—as these things go."

"You have had much experience in this business then?" I asked.

He nodded.

"Some one must help the erring. I dare say we all have our little secrets. The unfortunates are those who are found out. Our charges are reasonable, our first duty to our clients. We assure you of protection against future attacks upon you."

I'd have throttled the truth out of him if I thought that he knew anything. One of his eyes had a deep gash under it, and his nose had been bent not so long before. Some one else evidently had the same ideas, but he could lead me nowhere. I grew tired of his chatter, rose, half turned my back to him and leaned against the marble mantel above the fireplace.

"You have wasted your time," I told him. "I have been going back through my memory and do not, at the moment, recall any affair with a married woman. Try the house next door. The man's out late nights, fights continually with his wife and has money. No charge for the information. I like your face."

And to a certain extent I did—liked the way it had been pushed around lately. I didn't muss him up myself because of the feeling that Oscar wouldn't approve—not good form.

"Perhaps—" he said, very slowly, "perhaps I can

refresh your memory—with the lady's name. Often we are mistaken concerning a maid or a matron."

"All right," I said lightly. "Let's have the lady's name. I may have missed one or two going over the list."

"The lady," he started—stopped a minute, the smirking grin slipping over to the corners of his mouth. "She is an actress who calls herself Miss Josey Mears."

Did I lose my head? Yes—completely. I was on him like a panther. My right hand clutched his throat—my left wound around his right wrist, shaking the stub-nosed automatic to the soft carpet. For a moment I saw red. Boy! Meyer & Meyer came near to needing another clerk. A hard-headed, fast-thinking man of the world I'd always been. Now—I'll admit it—there was murder in my heart.

Somewhere, far back in my head, something snapped—seemed to send a rush of blood pulsing through my brain—my vision cleared—my heart grew more regular—I saw plainly the white face, the darkening lips and the protruding tongue—even the grapelike, bulging muscles on my straining fingers. That was all—I just opened my fingers—stepped back and let Skinny Face sink to the floor.

He half crouched there a minute, sucking in great gasps of air. His eyes rolled up at me like a black-face comedian—he understood—felt how close he had been to death. I paced the room. Overwhelming blood-red anger is a terrible thing!

Some feel a trembling of the whole body afterward—a reaction of weakness that knocks one completely. I didn't. There was just a deadly calm—and a brain as clear as a mountain stream, though racing as rapidly, too.

One thing stood out—overshadowed all the others. Josey Mears had been an actress. Was she still one? Had she played a part that afternoon? Certainly, unless Josey was actually married, this blackmail was a useless farce without the help of the girl.

The creature on the floor had crawled to the door—pulled himself erect and stood there, leaning against the casement—bracing his body as he clutched spasmodically for the knob. Twice he opened his mouth to speak—twice he raised his hand and pointed a finger at me. Whether his tongue was too dry, or there was something in my face that stopped him, I don't know.

But he said nothing—stood so a moment, found the knob and passed out into the hall. I heard him fumbling at the front door, followed quickly, and gave him my parting shot.

"That the—the girl is married, I don't believe," I told him, and my voice rang with a deadly meaning. "But if she is—this husband, this foreigner—who would practice physical violence, if he's a friend of yours, warn him to steer clear of my house—I make no threat, mind you, but use your imagination. I have little patience with swaggering, bullying—" I paused,

just opened and closed the fingers of a hand that stretched out toward the cowering dandy who pressed his body flat against the door.

It was enough—a hand behind him sought the knob, a quick spin, a sudden turn of his slender body, and the door was open. Just a shadow there for a moment, then the faint light of gathering darkness. The villain in this latest little piece was gone. As some lad once chirped: "He could a tale unfold."

My first thought as I stepped back into the front room—had I done anything that would hurt Josey? No—I thought not. The threat of the Black Circle was, this time, an idle one. They couldn't very well give publicity to any story that would link my name up with Josey Mears. Her usefulness to that gang would be over then.

Often, one who can't pay is picked on simply to call the attention of wealthy victims to their own immediate danger. A little example pointed out to a wealthy prospect would bring good results. And Josey? Had I, after all, been a puppet in her hands? Would she work with them? Was her love a pretended, shoddy thing? Why had she urged me to run away? Did she really love me—and yet must she betray me into the hands of these vultures?

Was there a husband—a foolish, childish marriage from which she had long since escaped? Was that what these blackmailers held over her head? Were they through with Josey? Had her usefulness ended?

Were they casting her off like a worn and ragged glove? And—oh, was she, after all, an actress—a great actress? I clenched my fist—despite it all I still loved Josey Mears.

CHAPTER XVII

THE CALL FOR HELP

One thing stood out. The deeper the scheme, the more enmeshed Josey became in the clutches of the Black Circle—the more she needed me. To save one from others demands physical courage—to save one from one's self demands a moral courage; a work in which the former sinks to insignificance.

Twice I went to the phone, determined to call Josey, and twice I half-lifted the receiver and let it fall back into place. Indecision with me was a new feeling—and not one that inspired confidence. Confidence—that was my strong point—and now—but I'd see Josey the next night. Then I would understand more—find out perhaps that, after all, she was only an actress—and I a puppet in the hands of the very organization I was trying to hunt down.

The habits of life are strong—that evening I spent in reading, and actually following what I read. Twenty-four hours and I'd know the truth, read what was behind those great brown eyes, pierce beneath that look of childish innocence.

Nine o'clock, and no little old stranger. Ten, and I grew worried. Why did he not come? And the

check? But I passed that off with a shrug of my shoulders. Perhaps it had just been put through the bank—cash, more likely, since he seemed bent on—

The phone—sharp, imperative, forewarning. I knew even before I lifted the receiver that something had gone wrong—terribly wrong. And it had. A whisper—a faint, inarticulate voice—a sudden, spasmodic gurgle—and a single shriek—then clearly, cutting like a knife across the wires, the words:

"Help—White Circle—Black—death. And—and I have seen his face—it is—"

The distant thud of a falling body—the metallic, resounding bang of a crashing phone—a far-away rumble and the tiniest click, as if some one replaced the receiver on the hook.

The voice I knew—it was the little old man. The appeal in it I understood—he was in the hands of the enemy. The conclusion I guessed at. Somewhere among that myriad of houses murder had been done. At his home, of course, where else would he have the opportunity to call like that? And now—how could I reach him? Where did he live? How did he expect me to help him?

Central, of course. The call could be traced. But that would take time—and explanation, too. Too late to save the old man—too late also to lay a hand on those who wrung that agonizing cry from those old pale lips.

God, what a minute as I paced that room! Think-

ing, muttering aloud—drawing and replacing my gun. Nervous fingers—quick, uneven steps, and the door opened. Oscar entered—watched me for a moment. For the first time, I think—for my vision was not clear—there was emotion on his face. Every action, every movement of my facial muscles told him that something was wrong—terribly wrong.

He crossed the room, took me by the shoulders, half pushed me close to the mantel, and poured me a drink. But I pushed it away—the thing would pass. Josey was forgotten—the check was forgotten—those gray, honest eyes—that determined, wrinkled face—his final words of the night before, when he spoke of his fate being in the hands of God.

"It's the little old man who came here the other night." I gasped out the words to Oscar. "I must find him—Oscar—must find him at once. But how—I—"

And Oscar's face lighted up.

"His house, sir, No. —— West Ninety-Seventh Street." And as my eyes widened in surprise: "I did not like him, sir—his way of coming, his actions—I followed him the other night and—"

Good old Oscar, good old suspicious, practical Oscar. No imagination, maybe, but a great deal of common sense.

I was too choked up to speak, but my face must have shown my gratitude as I pinched Oscar's shoulder.

"The car," was all I could get out. And Oscar understood—he was gone in an instant. I was my own man again—my sweater, my cap, my gun I slipped into the loose pocket. This was action. This was soothing to my nerves. Could I save the little old man? Hardly. Could I avenge him?

I clutched the gun the tighter. They would search his place, no doubt. Perhaps he was still alive—they sought information from him—they had not killed at once, otherwise, how the phone call? Somehow he had outwitted them. Might he not—

I dashed from the front door. White seals, white mask were forgotten. This was no errand of paid-for mercy. This was not the White Circle—this was Stacey Lee—Stacey Lee, of the old days, bent on vengeance. In each man's soul there lurks the germ of the killer. So I thought as I urged Oscar on to greater speed as we dashed through the streets of the city. A few blocks across town, ten blocks uptown, no more—and we were there, skidding to the curb across the street, a half block away.

For the first time I realized just where the residence of the little gray stranger was. Smacked close up against the house of the Clayburns. Was this his home or just a house rented, to be near the woman he would save? Thoughts only—no wasted time. I had dashed across the street, sought the great front door, found it open, and burst into darkness.

Cautious in the hall? Not I. A trap? Would

others wait for me? I did not care. This was a time when a man fought it out, shooting as his foes shot, watching in the darkness for that orange-blue flame that directs a return fire. How steady my hand was now—how calm my nerves—how regular the beating of my heart!

Darkness below—an eerie silence and a light above—the faintest glimmer. Three seconds in the hall below, and I was on the stairs, mounting them as silently as it is possible when one takes two at a time. Seconds count in a matter like this. The light! A door at the end of the narrow hall, flung wide open, shooting its rays into a square upon the worn carpet.

Hidden foes, shadows within the darkened rooms I passed? Perhaps. But their opportunity to shoot was come and gone in a moment. I just swung down the hall—into that square of light, and the door closed softly, swung over gently by an unseen hand or a bit of a breeze.

Yes, it closed, but it did not bar me. I had slipped through the ever-narrowing crack—placed my back against it as it clicked home—and stood in the burst of light.

There was no blaze of a roaring gun, no sound to break the stillness, no living creature. Just a waving curtain by the open window, and—yes, the tightly bound figure of a dead man, who lay—soft, gentle, gray eyes staring unblinkingly up at the two electric lights on the ceiling.

Dead! That is something that a doctor didn't have to tell me. One look was enough—more than enough. There is a feeling that comes over me when I stand in the presence of death—and now, when I looked more carefully, that feeling was intensified to a certainty. A long, sharp knife—two inches of the razorlike blade glimmering above his chest—the black, rough handle standing upright.

Straight as an arrow it marked the downward passage to the dead man's heart. No need to tell you—no need to be surprised. The gray eyes of the White Circle would see no longer. My little old man was dead.

I didn't bend over the body—try to reason out why the hands and feet were bound—fathom the gruesome story connected with the telephone that stood by his head, just at the foot of the small oaken table. Each little detail told its sory.

And yet what interested me mostly then was the story of that gently closing door, the draft from the window, perhaps, more than likely, but I was taking in the whole room—the open closet door, its bleak, dark background, with its hanging robes and clothes.

Gun ready, eyes ever on the window, I ducked in and out of that closet. Not the sign of a soul—I had already looked beneath the high, single bed. No other place to hide a cat in. Nothing but that open window, with its swinging drapes. I had been careful in watching that—careful to keep to the side of it—now I

approached it cautiously, shot the drapes aside with the barrel of my gun, and shoved my head without.

A quick glance up and down for hidden figures, then a more careful survey. A balcony there, a little wooden affair, not a fire escape, you understand. Nothing above—the darkened sill and the faintest outline of a window. But below, the wooden floor of the little porch broke my view and I dared not step out and look more closely. A window, dark and with drawn shades, was opposite, three feet, no more. If a curious neighbor came into that room! I spun the key in the door.

Not a living soul watching me, anyway—that much was certain. And my duty now was to the dead. Slipping back into the little room, I knelt beside the body. Gruesome in a way? Yes. And, somehow, I felt responsible for his fate. Last night—the havoc I had caused at Crestwood, my rescue of Mrs. Clayburn, the destroyed letters, the man I had shot down in that first exchange of shots. All this was directly the cause of his death.

An old man who had stepped out of his part of good Samaritan to many and played with fire. And I—I had encouraged him. His idea? Certainly. His game? Yes. His plot—the entire result of his unceasing efforts to help others. And yet it was through me that vengeance had come.

The police! Of course I could notify them—should, but I didn't. That would not be his way—not be his

desire. As if I had heard his spoken words, I knew that his dying wish would be that another carry on his task to completion, the running down of the Black Circle. And then I saw it, in the middle of his forehead, but so tiny and so awkwardly made that one might have taken it for a smudge of dirt. But to me it stood out clearly—a black circle.

I had used several seals in my first night's work, laughed over them, perhaps, and yet been a bit proud of my work. Now, in one single smudge of black the enemy had overshadowed all my petty accomplishments —laid low the foundation of a slow building up of evidence against this one wanted man—this directing genius who guided blackmailers—caused suicides—and now had turned to willful murder.

CHAPTER XVIII

A WHITE, SLENDER ARM

A SEARCH of the body brought nothing—each thing that I touched I replaced, and then, in his hands I saw it. The murderer had overlooked that, a tiny slip of paper. A message, to me perhaps. The note that would reveal the identity of the Black Circle himself; for the dead, gray eyes had looked in life on the man that he had sought and recognized him. Hadn't he been about to tell me the name?

I pried apart the tenacious grip of those lifeless fingers, smoothed out the tiny strip of paper, read the lines upon it in disappointment. Yet, with a little gulp somewhere within me. The old man had died as he had lived.

What is the death of one for the good of so many? The White Circle, directed by the hand of God, will yet strike.

Now, just what did that mean—and his hands were too tightly bound to write—besides, the paper was faded, the ink dried. Had he had a presentiment of

his end, had he clutched it from the desk in the corner when they were upon him? Who was to continue the activities of the White Circle? I, but then I had just been engaged—a hired—

"Throw them up and throw them high!" I knew before the words were spoken that I was caught—trapped like a child in a plot I half expected. From the window, too, the words were spoken as heavy feet thudded upon the floor. My gun clattered to the hard boards, my hands went up, I was facing death, and I knew it—that powerful black, flat nose of a heavy automatic was not three feet from my chest.

But could he use it—use it and get away? A hope there. At the best, though, I had been recognized by an agent of this murderous organization. Would I be spared this time, to later feel the vengeance of the Black Circle? Were those two glaring eyes that watched me through the slits in the black mask marking me for death?

The man was huge and powerful—not tall—rather, the semblance of strength lay in great shoulders—hunched forward—hamlike hands—steady, knotted fingers that gripped tightly at the gun.

"Who are you?" he asked.

Something in that. They had not known me then, had not known to whom the little old stranger telephoned.

"An acquaintance of this—this man." I half looked down at the body. "I was passing—was to call on him

to-night and—I find—" I shuddered. There was no need of acting out my horror—I felt that—a few days —hardly more than a few hours, and I had grown very fond of this eccentric old stranger.

If I could play the part of an innocent fool who had just happened in—well—even the powerful hand of the Black Circle would hardly take human life needlessly. This man was thinking things out. I could see the indecision in his every movement. The desire to kill in that finger that tightened about the trigger —and yet he hesitated. The Black Circle doubtless planned for one killing—not two.

"Where did you get that gun?" he asked suddenly, and his head came up like an animal who gets the scent. Perhaps he had searched this room before I did—would know if I lied. But I tried it anyway.

"In the closet there." I jerked a thumb toward the still open closet door. "On the floor—back in the corner—my foot kicked against it."

His eyes gleamed the brighter through the slits—but I could not get what he was thinking.

"Your name—and how did you come here?"

"Fred Saunders—I came by appointment." My answers came fast enough; nearness to death never dulls my brain.

"He telephoned you." And although the words were flung quickly at me—a statement and not a question—there was just the slightest note which told me the speaker was not sure. I tried another lie.

"I called him—thought that he called for help—at least, it sounded that way. But he's dead—" And then narrowing my eyes, "Did you owe him money, too?"

The man started slightly at this. Did he read the crafty look that I put into my eyes. If I could only have seen his face! Been sure how he was taking it. For all I knew he might be playing with me—have recognized me at once. But he didn't speak like a man who moved in the social circle that held many of the Black Circle's men—and yet it was hard to tell.

Came a sharp intake of breath. And then—

"I'll search you—turn around."

That was good—a single man with a gun could never search me and get away with it. I had a trick or two of my own that I had used with his sort before. But I swung about. That he wouldn't try going through my pockets with my face toward him, I knew. His kind didn't. They see too much danger in that. Yet his very caution would be his downfall.

He would have to reach around my body to get his fingers into my vest pocket. That would bring him very close to me—too close to shoot when I grabbed that wrist and lurched backward. Dangerous! Of course—but one must take chances, and here was the time to take them. That he had been taken in by my fool talk, I did not for a moment believe.

He wanted only to gain time—to think—to piece

out the puzzle that brought me—and to fit me into it—learn exactly what part I played.

The expected hand never came. Instead there was a chuckle behind me—a low, evil laugh. Nothing of humor in it—cold, cruel, heartless—and with a touch of hate, if you get what I mean.

"You can turn around again," he said slowly, but there was a new note in his voice. Not one of indecision now—he had made his plans. And it came to me that they—well—were not exactly adapted to long life and the pursuit of liberty for Stacey Lee.

I swung around again and faced him. He with his back close to the blowing curtain; I in the middle of the room—nothing between us but emptiness and—that round, black hole at the end of cold steel.

"Fred Saunders it may be." And there was a touch of swagger to his head as he spoke. "But I'd know them shoulders of yours anywheres."

Disconcerting certainly. But where had he seen them? As to that he was not going to enlighten me just yet.

"I was in the room above when you came in." He nodded his head up and down, and there was considerable satisfaction in the tone of his voice. "A rope ladder, you know. You see, I helped put out the old party. Ready and willing I was to do it."

"And you'll die for it." I quit playing the fool now. This man had marked me for death and I knew it. The time was coming when I'd have to reach out—

reach for his throat. Would I get it? There was a chance, of course. Just a matter of how well he directed his lead, and if the force of the bullet would hurl me back.

"Not me." He shook his head. "Not me. I ain't one to die by the rope or by electricity—or even them itching fingers of yours." I took the hint and straightened my hands. "You see, there was a sort of duty in this job—in the old party going over. But to—well—meet you like this and be paid for it—that's oh, more than any man has a right to expect. The old party had a hand in the killing of my brother."

"A very laudable obituary for him," I sneered. The thing now was to make this swaggering bully lose his head. I had hope again. This lad took pleasure in his killing. "You're from the Black Circle, of course?"

But I couldn't goad him into anger—or startle him into moving that gun hand.

"Yes—" he said very slowly, and I felt that his teeth clenched, for his words were not so clear—though articulate enough. "This man planned the killing of my brother, but you—" and now the hatred blazed forth in his voice, "you committed the crime. You—" I had been about to make a bid for it, but his gun was thrust forward—his chin out—his black mask close to my face. I could feel the pressure of the cold muzzle right against the—yes, the even beating of my heart. "I mean last night at Crestwood." He never let his eyes leave mine.

So he knew me. That was it. It was bad enough to have the vengeance of the Black Circle over my head—and now—one of them with a personal grudge in his mind—murder in his soul—and his gun against my heart.

"You know, do you?" I could feel that his finger was ever tightening. Now was the time—no chance of life—death sure—but I'd die as I had lived—fighting to the last. I had heard of dead men's fingers clasped like locks of iron upon another's throat. We'd see what there was in it. The muscles of my arms bulged—that one supreme effort must do it—my fingers must close before—and I stooped.

"You've got me," I said. "Just a minute though—I can tell you something of interest to you—perhaps then you will let me go."

And I hadn't spoken a second too soon—I heard the click as the trigger dropped back into place.

"About the White Circle—something about him—maybe—but he's dead now. There's another working for him perhaps—if there is, and you give me the name—" And so he went on, all eagerness—a minute meant nothing to him, there in that lonely, deserted house. If he could learn something to take back to his devilish master—then he'd shoot.

Why did I encourage him? Simple enough. I was not looking at his black mask any more—not thinking of fingers that itched to wind around his throat. I was looking over his shoulder—watching a long, thin,

white arm—a snakelike, curving, flitting sort of an arm—that was creeping further and further into the room from between the curtains at the window. And something black and heavy and searching now hovered above the dark cap of the man who was bent on murder.

I bit my lip and waited—I didn't talk any more. I couldn't. That thin arm fascinated me. Would it strike in time—would it strike hard enough to save me? Was it the arm of the law? Hardly—a creeping, slender bit of bone—no muscle—white and delicate.

"Damn your hide! Open your face or close it forever." My friend of the black mask had not studied control. Then it all happened at once. That white arm flashed like a gigantic wing—up and down—with a strength and swiftness that belied its delicate softness.

I turned sidewise with the quickness of an eel—heard the thud of iron upon a skull—the roar of the automatic—the sharp pain in my side felt as if a red-hot iron had been scraped across it.

Black mask sagged to his knees—hesitated a moment and fell to the floor—one hand stretched out and resting upon the upturned face of the little old man he had killed. Dead! Why, the blow was like that of a steel drill driven by steam. His head had been crushed as completely as if a huge bowlder had fallen upon it.

The suddenness of the whole thing—the sharp sting in my side—that one terrible blow—the echoeing roar

of the gun—and the penetrating odor of powder left me for once out of the running. I just stood and stared. At what? At nothing—the waving curtains, where the arm had been, still stirred gently in the quiet breeze—no footstep echoed upon the balcony.

CHAPTER XIX

THE HOUSE NEXT DOOR

Came reality again—and with it the desire to look at the face of the man who had sought my life and met such a terrible end. That my life saver would now show himself I never doubted. Why run now, when the danger was over? Why stick my head out that window? Perhaps the one who had struck was not particular. Recovering my own gun, I tore the mask from the face of the battered head.

No recognition there—a new face to me—just an evil countenance, full of a certain low, animal-like shrewdness—not intelligent, you understand—not even clever; just shrewd and—

I straightened. Of course; fool that I was. A roar like the one of that bullet would send its message echoing over a great, sleeping city. Almost below me, it seemed, came the shrill blast of a police whistle —then another—the sound of running feet—the beating of a club upon the pavement and a cry in the night. I ducked my head out the curtains and snapped it back in again.

There, in the strip of light, almost at the end of a little alley was the blue coated figure of a policeman.

Now from below came a heavy pounding upon the great oaken front door; the door that I had left open behind me. Who had closed it? Who was the owner of that slender but powerful white arm that had saved my life?

Trapped! The pounding grew louder. Voices called in the street without—a sharp command to open, from below. Distant murmurings that grew fainter, for I was out in the long hall, running rapidly up the stairs to the floor above. Two locked rooms —an open door—a ladder-like stairs that I dashed up. Echoing feet on the stairs below—clear, loud voices—the police were in the house.

The trap above opened easily. Onto the flat roof I slipped, out into the moonlight. Myriads of dwellings surrounded me. On one side was the alley in which I had seen the shadow of the officer—on the other the clear outline of the opposite roof—four feet—maybe five. Yet, I would have to chance it. Ridiculous, to hide there on the roof—the police would search that house of death from cellar to attic. The situation was a desperate one, and yet—

Hurriedly, I slipped off my shoes—picked out a place on the opposite roof where a small cupola arose above the flat surface, and, taking a short run, jumped out into space. Were they watching there in the street? Would sharp eyes see the flash of my body for the fraction of a second that I flew through the moonlight? Crouched low, I landed—stockinged feet beating softly

on the tar covered roof. Good enough, I had made a fair start. The block would be watched, no doubt—but I intended to get as far away from the house of murder as possible.

To the opposite edge of the roof I crept—peered across the next one and knew the truth. I had jumped at the wrong side—the distance to the next house was a good twenty-five feet—not an impossible leap perhaps—and yet, one that I knew I couldn't make.

Time now—a minute—perhaps less—and daring men with drawn guns would be creeping out on the next roof, peering through the darkness—guessing what the cupola on the next house hid. I was dealing with no country police, but shrewd, trained man-hunters, who knew every trick in the game.

Of course I could turn and face them—tell the truth—take a chance—give all the evidence that I possessed about the criminal organization called the Black Circle. But what evidence did I have? None to amount to anything. Mrs. Clayburn would have to be dragged in to verify my story—and Josey Mears perhaps, as we got deeper into it. But the Black Circle—the leader—his discovery would be as far away as ever—further perhaps.

My story would be doubted—it was certainly a strange one, to say the least. I clutched my gun tightly—set my lips grimly. Vengeance—that was it. No money in it for me now. The White Circle was dead.

My hand crept along one of the cupola windows.

It was not locked. I slipped it gently upwards, heard the click of a trap across space, a heavy tread of boots —and I was inside. Shading my searchlight with my hand, I let a narrow stream of light slip about the floor. Why, the room was heavily carpeted—an easy chair, too—several huge cabinets—numerous vials and trays. Stairs—no trap door here. A few quick steps —a door at the bottom.

I pushed it open, closed it softly behind me, and stood in the darkness of a silent house. Now what? My entrance to that house might be suspected—would, indeed. A cordon of police was no doubt thrown around the block—unless some one had seen the owner of that white arm fleeing from the house—or perhaps he was still lurking in the house. If so, I had a good chance. He was a friend, no doubt—one who would remain silent.

But I shrugged my shoulders as I felt my way along the narrow hall, gripping now the smooth surface of a railing—the banister, which would guide me to the floor below. Life is a great gamble—we must take the cards that are given us.

Carefully, step by step, I descended those old stairs. The carpet upon them was thick, but the loose boards gave beneath me—I hugged close to the wall, an arm flat against it—each foot testing the step below before I put my weight upon it—ears straining for a ring of the doorbell—for some one moving in the house below; also anxiously trying to hear the tread upon the roof

above if some one had followed. Nothing but silence! I reached the floor below.

A step—the opening of a door—a light almost directly before me—and the loud creak of a straining board as my weight settled back upon the last step. The man who suddenly appeared from the lighted doorway clutched his bathrobe tightly about him—half swung toward me—changed his mind and turned to reënter the room.

But he had seen or heard or guessed the truth. It does not matter. I knew that he at least sensed my presence—it was written all over his white, boyish face. Too late he acted—I swiftly crossed the few feet, stuck my gun against his side and whispered softly in his ear:

"Not a sound—back into the room."

I heard the quick intake of his breath—saw the sudden rising of his head and the opening and closing fingers. But he spoke no word—made no sound—silently obeyed me. Fear, caution, surprise. It made little difference. For the time, at least, I had warded off the cry of warning that would bring the police. And each step I took in the direction of my liberty made the story I must tell to the police, if captured, more improbable—less like the words of an honest man.

The room was a bedroom and the first glance told me that, though in pyjamas and bathrobe, the man had not yet retired. The bed neat and smooth—the shaded

lamp by the window, with an open volume upon the table—paper too—figures covering several sheets—well bitten pencil—books scattered here and there. And the window—could it be possible that he had seen some of the tragedy enacted upon that little balcony?

I jerked my cap far down—held my head low and my eyes up as I backed him into a corner of the room.

"I am not a thief." I had no desire to unnecessarily frighten this man. "Unfortunate circumstances have given me a part in a tragedy. If you remain quiet no harm will come to you." My eyes involuntarily rested upon the open closet door. The temptation to gag him and tie him up was strong.

If he had been of the enemy I would not have hesitated a minute, but with an honest citizen—oh—silly of me perhaps, but there comes a revulsion of feeling to such action—puts yourself on a par with the criminals you hunt, if you get what I mean.

"The police." His voice was very low. "I heard the whistle. You have committed a crime."

"No—" I shook my head. Then louder, "Stay away from that window." For all his nervousness he was an active little man—edging ever nearer to the raised shade. I didn't pull the shade down—this light might be seen from the street—any sudden change in the appearance of the window would be noted and acted upon by the police.

"Is there a rear exit from the house—a way onto the street behind?"

"Only over a fence—not such a high fence though." His face seemed to light up as his fingers nervously brushed a book from the desk. There was a thud—a certain satisfaction to his lips—a gleam of understanding in his eyes, I thought. Had he purposely knocked off that book? Was it to awaken some one below?

I set my lips grimly.

"That little move," I told him, "will cost you a few unpleasant hours. Back toward that closet." This wiry little chap wasn't open to reason. That book dropping was done intentionally. I saw it in the half a glance that he cast over his shoulder. Right to the closet door I had him. Acting like a common thug, you think. Perhaps. But there was nothing else to do. I'd have to keep him from giving the alarm for a bit, while I took a chance on that back fence.

His face brightened—the worn, haggard, studious shadow lifted somewhat—a brightness of boyish enthusiasm took its place—and I knew too late.

"That's the girl." He spoke very slowly and his lips were smiling now. Into my back came the hard pressure—I didn't have to turn my head—have to look to know that a gun was planted square in the center of my spine. Also, this nervous little gentleman was enjoying the procedure immensely. He possessed something of my own temperament.

"So, Mr. Burglar." His hand came slowly up toward my gun. "I'll take that, I think." And I was thinking, too—thinking fast. If I threatened to kill

him if he moved, what then? Under certain circumstances that might go all right. But I didn't know who was behind me—and besides, the street outside was thick with the police. We'd look a pretty picture standing there, if the police broke in the doors or followed a servant to that one lighted room.

Already I had gone too far. I should have faced it out in the house of death—told a straight story. Now —well, I shrugged my shoulders. I'd have to make the best of it, perhaps be held for a double murder.

The fingers of the little man wound gently about my gun and slipped it from my grasp. Still the hard pressure in my back and the deadly silence—never a threat, never a word—just the feel of a prodding gun.

"Good." The man spun my revolver around on his finger. Pretended familiarity there, but I didn't wish to see him commit suicide, or perhaps send a bullet crashing through my head. So I warned him.

"That gun is keyed to a hair's pressure," I told him. "A bit of a jerk to that swing and—"

CHAPTER XX

THE WOMAN IN YELLOW

A SHARP buzz somewhere distant in the house, a moment's wait, and a heavy pounding on the front door. Nothing alarming in that now. I expected it. I wet my lips, the game was up. After all, I had made a sorry figure, twice in one night, and this time no long, slender, white arm stretched through the window.

"This gun may not be loaded." He looked down at my revolver. "I've heard of such things, so we'll let you take charge of things, Florence. I'll just run down the stairs, let the police in and be right back. What a lark!"

Florence! I think that it came to me for the first time then. The house next door; of course! I knew when I swung around, saw the shoulders of the man pass out the door, faced the black mouth of a rather large and ancient pistol and—

"Florence Clayburn." No more than a whisper. There she stood, the yellow still predominating in the lightness of her negligee. Funny! Tragic! Here I was, trapped by the very woman I had saved.

Did the man in the doorway hear my voice, catch

that faintest whisper of the woman's name on my lips? His slight shoulders seemed to be framed there a moment, but only a moment, then he was gone, his feet slowly echoing down the stairs, his voice calling once:

"Coming." A pause, then to Mrs. Clayburn: "Hold him a minute, while I slip a coat on." And he could think of his coat in a moment like this, while his wife held at bay a "burglar"—a murderer, too, for all he knew!

The woman and I faced each other. After my gasp of recognition she could read nothing in my face. No use to make a scene then, no use to expect her to help me. It was too late for all that. But the police, when they put those human bloodhounds on my trail, somewhere along that line Mrs. Clayburn would come into the story.

She was staring at me now, her eyes wide, the fingers that held the gun trembling, lowering, until the weapon pointed at my feet. There was my chance, of course, but what good was it? The house was surrounded. Already I could hear others moving in the house, the patter of feet to the main floor, then her gasp.

"The White Circle." A moment's pause, great, wide, frightened eyes, the fingers opened and the gun fell unnoticed to the floor. "God forgive me," she murmured softly.

"It's all right," I tried to tell her. "You must pre-

tend not to know me. No one will notice your agitation, a woman and a burglar, they'll expect hysterics, almost anything. And the gun—" For the first time it struck me how strange for a woman to have a gun.

"I've had it for months, that was to be the end." Her voice was very low. "And now to use it like—like this—"

"No one will know." I felt that things were getting worse; one of her hands was on my left shoulder, the other hung listlessly by her side. By the time the police came they would find a frightened woman clinging to me, pleading for my life, begging them to let me go.

"It's all right," I repeated. "Control yourself, they won't suspect the truth and—"

Faintly, the rattling of a chain, a gruff voice in the hall below, a more hurried, louder, shrilly explaining, the voice of the husband.

"The White Circle." The woman bent lower, looking into my face. "I'm just a pawn in the game"—then—"get in there, the closet, don't hesitate, quick, now, at once."

I held a hand toward her. Why make the thing worse; and then she had turned from me, running rapidly into the hall, her scream echoed and reëchoed through the house. An answering cry from below, the shattering of glass just without the door, and—well, she had taken things into her own hands. I must play the game. Slipping into the closet I pressed tightly

up against the wall, partly hidden by an overcoat and several suits of clothes.

Many feet now, once in the room, the window flew up, a man called a warning to some one in the street below, they were through the house, on the roof.

"Out that window. Gad! He must have broken a leg." I heard a gruff voice in the hall without. A stealthy step in the room now, approaching the closet door. Had they guessed the truth? Was I to be dragged out like a common thug? I braced myself against the wall, stood erect; when that door opened I'd step out. And my story—of a certainty it was shot to pieces now. My actions had hardly been those of an honest man.

Click. The closet door was locked. The footsteps hurried away now, sought the lower hall. Mrs. Clayburn, of course. A bad woman? Ingratitude? There's a laugh there. She was the finest little woman I knew, except—except— Why, that little runt of a husband of hers ever neglected her I—

Heavy feet, a spin of the knob, a quick jerk and—a police officer.

"Got a key to the door? Might as well make a clean job of it, you'll sleep better." Then in admiration: "My! But you're a plucky woman. There," kindly and fatherly, "you're lucky, too—desperate man, he." Silence. "Well, he's wanted pretty bad."

I could hear her sharp intake of breath, the sob in her voice when she told her lie.

"Frank lost it yesterday, but if we can't get in, no one else can."

Another spin to the knob, retreating feet, a sigh from me, a hoarse laugh, a muffled curse as a new voice reported to the speaker and silence.

Ten, twenty minutes passed. It seemed like years, but I counted it off as I have trained myself to do. Things quieted down, the police departed. I even heard the chain slip back on the door below, heard, too, the servants plodding upstairs in the back of the house. Then footsteps—two pair of feet, both light—as they swung into the room. Mrs. Clayburn was talking.

"Please give up any work you planned for to-night and don't sleep here, Frank."

"Not sleep here!" And the note of good-natured excitement had gone from his voice, that listlessness of his accent, too, was missing. A sort of—well, determination, more than hardness, was in his voice.

"I'll be afraid down there, after what happened. You'll sit in the next room, at least, close the door and work, if you want to. Here, I'll take these books down and—"

"Leave them here."

"Frank!" half defiant, half frightened. "I never—you never spoke like that to me before."

"No." But there was no question in his tone. "I'll sit here, Florence—sit here and think. Just think." Then suddenly, "How did you happen to have that gun?"

"I—I bought it at the rummage sale."

"It's only lately that you've lied. It's new to you, Florence, and—" I could feel that he held up his hand, for I could hear her gasp, as if she started to talk and stopped. "I don't like it, that's all. You'd better go to bed. I want to be alone."

"But I don't want to." There was fear as well as pleading in her voice now. "Frank—please."

"Don't, don't. I couldn't stand your arms about me now. Can't you see? Can't you understand? Oh, I'm not altogether a fool—late hours, night after night, and now—"

"Now—now what?"

"That door—that closet door. Did you think that I wouldn't know—that one of the officers wouldn't mention it? Do you think that I didn't hear the man whisper your name, didn't see your color change at recognition? Oh, I don't think that he had anything to do with that crime. Another one—one who robs—"

"Don't, Frank, don't. You can't realize what you say. The excitement—"

"I realize." His voice was loud now—accusing, threatening, and above all, a certain sort of hopelessness in it. "Why, it was I who gave you time to plan before I opened the door—plot for a way to deceive the police, just as you have been deceiving me for months. But—there, give me the key." His feet hurriedly crossed the floor. Then: "No matter—I have another." A woman's cry, a slight groan,

a feeble struggle, I think, and a key slipped with a harsh, metallic click into the lock.

A sudden twist—the door was flung open. I didn't wait. I just stepped into the room, slightly blinded by the sudden glare of light, but able to see the menacing mouth of my own gun, held in the hand of Frank Clayburn.

Explain? No—I didn't try to. The truth to him then might be just as bad as his suspicions. Yet, how a man could live in the same house with a woman like Florence Clayburn and not see—understand that there could be nothing but good in her. I had at first thought that she was weak—now I knew that she was strong. At least, given the chance, she had character—real character.

"Ah—" Frank Clayburn was speaking, and his voice shook with passion. "You are not a stealer of money, nor the physical killer of men. Come—" My vision cleared and I saw the gun tremble in his nervous fingers. "I offer you the door—take it before I change my mind."

I half looked over his shoulder at Florence Clayburn—her lips moved, her eyes signaled mine, her hand pointed toward the door, and a finger shot across her lips for silence. Did I feel cheap? I don't know. Certainly, I didn't look any Don Juan as I backed to the open hall door. Halfway through it, the threatening gun still waving up and down between my stomach and my chest, he spoke.

"You've won her, of course—played the game as your kind see it." Red—why, his cheeks were aflame. "But—if she goes to you again—why, you keep her. I'm not the one to pay the bills for your—"

And that's as far as he got. The gun was forgotten—his size was forgotten—the white, frightened face of his wife was the only thing I saw. If Florence Clayburn was my sister I could not have held more respect for her than I held at that moment—more belief in her. But what's the use? I just raised my hand, and—palm out, fingers extended—brought it sharply across the lying mouth and the flaming cheek.

The white fingers stood out through the red. A tiny speck of blood dripped from his cut lip to his flat, protruding chin. There are times when a man just naturally is willing to commit suicide—this was one of them. A plain fool, I suppose, and yet—oh, I'd have done the same thing over again. Any place. Any time. We can't change our nature—I had a real respect for that bit of a woman in yellow.

CHAPTER XXI

INDECISION AGAIN

If his finger tightened about the trigger I did not see it. If he pressed the trigger and the gun missed fire I did not hear the click. Just the hiss of his breath as he drew it sharply in between his clenched teeth. I swung around and stepped into the hall. Gad! The man was lucky I didn't choke him to death while he pumped lead into me.

Almost at the front door, I paused and waited for the patter of feet to catch up with me.

"You can't go yet—a moment." Mrs. Clayburn laid a hand upon my shoulder. "The street is filled with men—the houses along the block are watched and —I want you to come upstairs with me a minute. I want you to see—the baby—know what you've done for me."

"What I've done for you?" But there was no mirth in my laugh. "It's what you've done for me, Mrs. Clayburn. I'm afraid all the work of the White Circle has gone for nothing and—"

"No." She shook her head. "And you mustn't blame Frank—he's unjust now, but he could have been harsh—and been right." She hung her head a mo-

ment. "Not in those awful thoughts, of course, but that I played with fire and came away with just singed wings."

Domestic troubles were not in my line. For the life of me I couldn't see how this one would be cleared up. If I were a woman and a—but that's something that could fill a book—has too often.

If there's one thing I always feel I've got time for, that is to look at a little child—especially a sleeping one. There's nothing that will get a man thinking nearer along the right track—separate the good from the bad in his mind, if he has doubts as to which is which. And me? I'm only human—have lots of doubts. There was still a feeling that I should have twisted the man's neck upstairs.

And the kid? Well, there was a gulp in my throat as I held the light while Mrs. Clayburn bent over the bed. She was a baby, I guess—three or four. Though she never woke up or once opened her eyes, her little hands crept around Mrs. Clayburn's neck and she murmured: "Mumsie, mumsie," over and over.

"You see—see what you've done for me—and why I tried to return just a little of it?" Mrs. Clayburn smiled sadly.

"But—I've hashed things now." Try as I might I couldn't think of a way to set things right.

"Not with Betty, though." She spoke very slowly —the curly little head pressed tightly to her breast. "I only wanted the right to hold my child like this

again—just the feeling that she would never know—and now—it doesn't matter what Frank thinks—that is, so much—I love him, of course. But the other is wiped out like a bad dream."

I scratched my head at that. It was reasoning, I suppose—yet, I couldn't see where she was any better off. But I looked at her and looked at the child. Day after day—night after night—this husband of hers had his chance to look at the same picture. He must be blind—that was all.

"Your husband's just a fool," I told her, and meant it.

She looked up quickly from the crib and her smile was a sort of hopeless thing.

"No," she said. "It's my fault, too. If he put his work ahead of me, it must be because I have failed somewhere. I love Frank—I'm sorry he said what he did—that you've heard. It's the first time he's ever said an unkind thing to me. That he believes it is—" She stopped, placed the child gently back in the crib. "I'll take the baby to mother to-morrow. Come—"

It was funny all around, no matter how you look at it. She wouldn't let me go out into the night—and there I sipped the coffee she had made while she went above and dressed. Twice I thought of slipping out, but I had promised her. Then again, what of her husband? Was she actually in danger? For I had read something else in the man's face beside just blind rage—he loved his wife. And a man in love will do any-

thing. How do I know? Well, that very afternoon I had been on the verge of making a few wild throws myself.

She was gone so long I was worried as I sat in the dining room, smoking. Once I stepped into the hall, listened and heard voices above. Mrs. Clayburn was all right then, for the low, musical note of her voice came to me—and then she was crying softly—and a masculine voice was comforting her. Funny, that.

I guess it was nearly an hour, then Mr. and Mrs. Clayburn came down the stairs together—arm in arm—like a young married couple, I thought. Where did I fit now? But Clayburn walked straight up to me—stood there, his head hardly reaching to my shoulder.

"You made a mistake when you hit me, Mr. White Circle." And his smile was again a boyish one. "You should have swung me around and kicked me. I can't help it, though. You see, for the past five years I've been somewhat of a fool."

I could agree with him in that, and I did. How did they fix it up? Just the way you'd expect would start the trouble all over again, only worse—she told him the truth—about the letters and everything. Her reason to me was a simple one.

"I just thought he ought to know before I left for mother's," she said.

Somehow, I seemed to be the one they thought responsible for everything turning out all right. Still, if I had had a hand in it, the last thing I would have

suggested at that time would have been the telling of the truth to this little cock of the walk. Still, I came in for the praise—swallowed it with the sandwiches and coffee, and listened to their laughter until long after dawn. I had nothing to laugh at. If Frank had been "somewhat of a fool," what of me? And what's more—I was out of a job.

It was Mrs. Clayburn's suggestion that I leave the house in the livery of her former chauffeur, who used to sleep in her house. And I did. She walked to the garage with me—smiled at an officer who stood against a telegraph pole across the street. Unquestioned, we took the car and drove straight to my door.

"I will never forget the White Circle," she told me, with a throb in her voice.

"The White Circle is dead." The words just slipped out, very low. When she read the late papers she would find out just what had happened in the house next door. I had given the Clayburns no explanation —asked only that they keep my identity a secret.

"The White Circle will always live—for me and Betty." She smiled up at me through moist lids. "His spirit, anyway, and while you live, his being."

Yep, she raised my hand and kissed it. Then she was gone, slipping in behind the wheel, and speeding away down the street.

Another good deed that I had a hand in. There was hope in that. After all, the clouds aren't nailed down. When I thought the clouds were the blackest,

they just swept aside and I got the credit for the house cleaning. Now I straightened, put my key in the lock. I must put my own house in order.

I looked up. Had its black outline caught my eye? I didn't know. But there, on the glass of the inside vestibule door, was a large black circle. How did they know? What made them suspect? Had I been hunted down, marked for death by the Black Circle? No—reason came to the front there. The only one to see my face was dead, struck down by an unknown hand. This then was simply a business warning, the threat of publicity connected with the visitor I had thrown out the afternoon before.

Tired! Man, I was dead. Mad, too, slightly. Things hadn't gone as they should. At Crestwood I had acted with my old time cunning, quickness of finger and steadiness of brain. This night I was a fliv. Too old for the game? Hardly that; gone stale in my easy way of living, I guess.

Oscar stood upon the stairs. A little gulp there. The good and faithful had been forgotten. Now he was worn and haggard, deeper rings under his eyes, his usual cadaverous appearance more ghoul-like. He didn't speak as he came down the stairs and clutched me by the hand. His mouth opened, came a queer gurgling sound, then silence. The habit of years held him, but his chalklike face and tightening fingers told its story. After all, Oscar was human. He never expected to see me again.

I just gripped his hand in return, squeezed it slightly and plodded wearily up the stairs. There was nothing to say. What Oscar suspected or knew would be buried inside that long, thin body of his. Why make the burden the harder? Why let him carry a secret that he perhaps more than half suspected? A servant, yes, and a good one, but first of all he was a friend. Relief, fear, doglike devotion, all were written in the pasty whiteness of his face.

"You have had a visitor, *monsieur.*" His voice seemed to come from a long way off.

"A visitor!" I stopped, swung about on the stairs.

"Last night—one o'clock this morning—just after —the disturbance in that house—and according to your instructions I left."

"Who was it, Oscar?" Did he expect me to be surprised? Was he giving me the opportunity to guess the truth? And what could Oscar know of the sudden romance in my life? But his next words gave me the key to the visitor.

"A lady, *monsieur.*" His great, sunken eyes looked up at me.

"Her name, Oscar?" I stretched out a hand and gripped him by the shoulder.

"Miss Mears." And those eyes of his seemed to bore right into me. No shock, no surprise, I had known before he spoke. "She waited an hour, sir, very nervous like, walking back and forth to the win-

dow, and when she left, she left by the servants' door, just seemed to melt into the night."

Josey Mears had been to my house, and a black circle was slapped upon the glass of the front door. A man was dead—murdered—and—

"Oscar," I said suddenly. "That trip I planned a week ago. I think I will follow it out, only this time you shall come with me."

"You are going to leave the city—now?" His shoulders were straighter than I had ever seen them, his face actually alive, his eyes with a sort of shine in them.

Indecision again. I clenched a hand tightly, but I nodded, turned and, passing upstairs, entered my own room. Oscar knew nothing, and yet his words had cut, a reprimand in his voice. As if—well, as if I was flying from something. And was I? Yes—not from the Black Circle.

I don't think it's in me to fear any man. Fear of a woman then? Perhaps. Reason told me that Josey Mears had betrayed me. Love told me something different. My aching spirit bade me flee. From what? Just a little turned-up nose and two big brown eyes? Laugh if you wish, but I guess that was it.

The wound on my side, I remembered it then, nothing but a scratch, iodine did the trick.

CHAPTER XXII

A PROMISE TO THE DEAD

I SWITCHED on the light. Two letters on my desk; both large, square affairs. The one I tore open hurriedly—just a card from Mrs. Robert T. Townsend—my invitation to the dinner, seven o'clock, Fieldstone, up near Riverdale. I flipped it back on the desk; that was a dead issue now. The other I opened more indifferently; the weight, the feel of it, all bespoke a stock prospective. And it wasn't; just a picture.

I half dropped into a chair. The eyes that stared out at me from a kindly, wrinkled face were gray, the chin was set, the hair—but it was the little old man—the White Circle. Now, who had sent that?

I searched in the basket where I had thrown the envelope, sought the postmark. Nothing there. The thing was obliterated, the ink heavy and running into the figures. New York, certainly, but the time—impossible to make that out. No name, no signature, just a few typewritten lines pasted carefully across the bottom of the picture. The same lines that I had found clutched in the little old man's hand.

What is the death of one for the good of so

many? The White Circle, directed by the hand of God, will yet strike.

Unconsciously my hand closed about the picture, crushing it between my fingers. I paced the room. And then just the one thought. Above money, above love, above self—Vengeance! I straightened out the picture, pressed it flat upon the desk, studied that fine face, those kindly, searching, gray eyes and made a promise to the dead.

A ring of the bell, the somber, silent appearance of Oscar. I even smiled when I spoke, a grim sort of smile perhaps.

"We won't pack the bags, Oscar—" and then, "I have business in the city, business that must be cleared up."

Oscar, too, was himself again, his face emotionless, his bow stiff and servile.

"Very well, *monsieur,*" was all that he said, as he turned and passed out the door, closing it softly behind him.

Somehow, that picture was just what I needed; that bit of writing at the bottom, a real stimulant. I was determined to carry on, and carry on just as the little old man had. One thing was certain: those little, white seals had brought the Black Circle out into the open once; the little old man had recognized the leader. Wasn't he about to tell me so himself?

Not only had he seen the man, but actually recog-

nized his face, his name and his position, no doubt. Good, then the man was to be found among the friends of people like Robert T. Townsend.

Money was the only thing I needed, and I did not have any too much of that, but if I struck in the open, perhaps the Black Circle himself would come to me, come to me with a long knife or a smoking gun. Again, good. I was willing to be marked for death. The time was ripe, no longer would I hunt them in the dark, meet secretly each trick that they led. My blood was hot.

Nothing would please me more than to finish it all up in one grand cloud of smoke. Action is my stuff. Oh, I had been getting plenty of it lately, but the wrong kind, if you get what I mean.

I sprung open my drawer, felt in it for that brace of heavy revolvers that I had put away two years before. The drawer—I came to my feet with a gasp—there, before my astonished eyes, was a thick stack of tightly bound bills, and in the center of the band which held them was a tiny white circle. Even in death the White Circle had paid its bills. Or—was there some one else? Did the little old man have full control? Was another the actual leader?

I tried to recall the conversations we had held, something about working for the White Circle, and not an individual—was the gray-haired old stranger who had first come to me in the night just an agent, a cog in a wheel, as well geared and as strongly linked as the rival

organization? Hardly. And yet here was money.

I ran my fingers over the bills quickly, checked them up again—five thousand dollars—right. Might it not have been there before? But that was impossible; I had looked in that drawer before I went out. Indeed, my seals and white mask were there. Who then? And a great lump rose in my throat. A hope, a new hope. No, silly, she was hardly more than a child, but—

"Oscar." No ringing of the bell this time, my voice simply shouted down the hall. And he came, his figure longer and more drawn out, in the deep, somber blackness of his bathrobe, the whiteness of the little night cap that was stuck straight on the top of his head.

"Oscar—Miss Mears—" I pinched his arm in my eagerness. "Did she—could she have come up to my room?"

"No, *Monsieur,* she could not." There was a finality to his voice, as well as a slightly hurt note.

"While you were doing something else—you had a hard night, you know—nerves and all that, perhaps—"

"She did not go above stairs. Things—of late, *monsieur,* your life has been different, and I have watched closely all visitors. Not once was Miss Mears out of my sight."

And that was that. Yet, some one had entered the house; and some one had put the money in my drawer. And that some one was part of the White Circle, part of the tragic game that I had started to play, as a light diversion, perhaps the leader now, anyway. A

new hand was directing operations, paying the money; an invisible hand, a hand that—I turned and gazed out of the window.

The invisible hand, the long, slender, white arm that had struck the blow which saved my life. So, that was what the writing below the picture meant. Was this little old stranger, after all, just a pawn in a great game? Did a master mind fight the Black Circle, fight in the dark, as the others did? But I—Vengeance! White Circle or no White Circle, Stacey Lee was willing to meet his enemies in the open.

"I need my rest, Oscar," I told him, my voice quiet and calm now. "Call me—say, five o'clock—and lay out my dress clothes, I am dining out. Until then, you sleep too. Let the house run itself."

"Very well, *monsieur.*" Another bow; fading, sunken eyes that held no question in them, and Oscar was gone again. I wondered did he think that his master had gone crazy altogether. And I wondered too, if that would make any difference to Oscar. Somehow, I thought not.

Sleep—that was it. Josey Mears—oh, I had hoped for a minute. And what of this other case, the man I was to help, the one my dead stranger had spoken about? But I shrugged my shoulders and I slipped between the covers. Others, or at least one other, was thinking for me again. Did I need that? When I worked on my own I—but—came sleep—the sleep of

utter exhaustion. What would the night bring? A new factor perhaps, a factor I had forgotten. The police!

I awoke refreshed. Just a cup of coffee and some toast and the evening papers. They helped some, too. The murder in the house in the Nineties was not given as much prominence as I had expected. A down town robbery, the killing of a well known broker, swept the headlines. But I learned something.

The little old stranger's name was Rollands. He was a money lender, and the dead man found in the house with him, a supposed victim of his usury. Not a pretty story, as it was printed. And I did not believe it. Some one had engineered that story, some one who— I dropped the paper. The very words, "Do you owe him money, too?" that I had spoken to the masked figure who held the gun against my chest.

Had some one else heard me—some one hiding in that house? Hardly. But the hand that crept in the window, the owner of that hand might have heard. But he was a friend, the feud between the White and the Black Circles was deeper than ever now. And the law held no place in it.

The Clayburns came in for little notoriety, just as a neighbor, the searching of their house, the escape of a criminal in that direction was not mentioned. Bad, that. Were the trained sleuths of the greatest police organization in the world already stretching out their net for me?

The telephone rang. Josey, I thought, as I lifted the receiver from the hook. And how would I speak to her? What would I say? Just play the game as she was playing it. That was it. I'd say nothing. But it was a masculine voice.

"Mr. Lee, this is the White Circle speaking." For a moment, longer perhaps, I heard no more, just knew that a man spoke, a deep, low voice, my head was buzzing. Then the words came to me clearly out of the ether. "You shall rest a bit after last night; nothing much now, just a talk with a man to-night; he will come to you at Townsend's. Don't ask questions, please.

"Listen to him, help him if you can, give him hope, walk alone in the grounds—a summer house, behind the house—at eleven; carry your handkerchief in your left hand, he will do the same, all is arranged. We must have revenge."

Not a word from me, just an answering voice when I lifted the receiver. Was this then the real White Circle? A different character than my little old man; a cold, metallic voice, one who stated facts without desire to see them accomplished, behind it. Simply as one who says, "You are paid, so you shall act."

Revenge! A hollow sound to that, not the bigness of heart of my former employer. *Justice or Retribution* would have been his word.

Another letter now, posted in the city at ten that

morning. Nothing but a card, typewritten words upon it.

The White Circle still offers one hundred thousand dollars for a glimpse of the unknown face.

Good enough. Again was predominating the business end of it. But why the card? Why not the same message over the phone? I tried to reason that out and thought that I had it. The card was the first thought, encouragement to keep me in the game. Somehow, the White Circle, this new leader, or the real leader, had heard of my intended visit to Townsend's; then the instructions.

This must be the same victim, the man whom the little old stranger, for I still preferred to think of him as such, had told me of.

Several times I called to Oscar without response, but at last he came, a much needed man. One acomplishment I had never mastered, that was the art of tying a dress tie.

"The furnace, *monsieur.*" He explained his absence. "We are without a furnace man." There was the reason for this, but I did not listen, I was humming a tune. Why? Because of the money, the new promise of the hundred thousand dollars the hope of action? I think not. Despite all my thoughts, my previous ideas, I—oh, I was going to see Josey Mears. Make what you can out of that. I'm not trying to explain it.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE AFFAIR AT TOWNSEND'S

FIELDSTONE? Not exactly. The Townsend house was more in the old section, across Riverdale Avenue, down toward the river. Not a new residence, but a massive, imposing structure of stone, a broad driveway, great trees and an acre or two of well kept lawn, dotted here and there by small houses, a miniature lake and completely surrounded by a luxurious and well kept hedge which was already green and becoming quite thick. It was indeed an ideal night—the beginning of spring, a real spring.

A few cars were already parked on the driveway around the house as I drove up in my hired touring car. Oscar, I thought, had had enough—not that I expected an exciting evening—the White Circle had even spoken of rest, and Oscar was entitled to it. Like the good servant he was, he resented the intrusion of the hired car, but he said nothing. Bowed perhaps a little stiffer when he opened the door for me to depart, but I noticed, too, as the car rolled down the street, that Oscar's face was planted close against the window of the front room.

Just the flatness of a white nose and two searching

eyes that tried to follow me through the night. Perhaps, even imagination was stirring within that practical head of his.

Mrs. Townsend's stiff carriage relaxed somewhat as I entered and took the hand that she extended toward me—a condescension, that—for the others her bejeweled fingers remained serenely parked upon her massive hips. Townsend, then, held some influence, and he came rolling across the room, his neck sunk deeper, the soft bosom of his shirt rising in great folds. Again my smile and the wonder how he got a collar on, that is, if he wore one. The need of it was not in any way apparent.

"My dear Mr. Lee." His right hand ran over his forehead, his left stroked his chin. "Exclusive party, this—er—Mrs. Townsend thinks so, anyway. As for me—" the long arms shot out—"the desirable are not always great, nor the great desirable." A jab in the ribs, a meaningless wink, an arm through mine and he escorted me to the stairs, left me there and returned to meet another guest.

I was solid with the Townsends—whether my talk of the previous afternoon, the possibility that I might invest in his house, or that I had proved myself a good listener, I did not know—the last seemed most likely. A little thrill though as I turned into the room reserved for the gentlemen's wraps. Townsend's voice came to me from below, his words clear, his laugh hearty, with a nervous tremor to it, but the name that he men-

tioned sent my spirits up. Josey Mears had just come in.

Of the five men in the little room above, I knew two to speak to, one, as a nodding acquaintance, one whose face was slightly familiar, and the fifth, a total blank. Yet that meant nothing. It was hardly possible that the Black Circle could find entrance here. That his victim had, I was sure, but which would be the one I was to meet and speak with on the grounds?

Again, how many of these men had open lives? How many hid nothing? A real thought there. The simplicity of the work of the Black Circle! How easy to shadow and discover a victim! Just the childish process of elimination—"eeny, meeny, miny, mo" business. A stolen letter, the knowledge of a secret rendezvous, the discovery of a fake business trip. Why, the whole game was a sinecure. Just the one difficulty. The finesse in handling the victim, bleeding him softly, scientifically, a study of human nature.

Behind it all, too, the danger that some day a man would walk straight to the district attorney with the whole story. Yet the chance of that was very small. A man with the courage to face the publicity of his own wrong doing is generally gallant enough to keep quiet to save the name of—a woman.

Josey Mears—at the foot of the stairs she met me, just seemed to float out of the dimness of the dull, yellow lights and cling to my arm.

"Stacey Lee." Her voice rang above the voices in

the great living room across the hall. "You're not reliable. I'm just making sure that you'll take me in to dinner, and no one else." Was there a hurt feeling in those deep brown eyes, the slightest pout to the natural redness of her lips?

"Why, Josey, now what?" There was lots more to say, but I didn't say it, just looked down at her, thought again of the lake and the rain, and the lithe young form close in my arms.

"Nothing much." The slightest shrug of her shoulders. "But I must honestly admit that you make a very handsome chauffeur, even if the uniform was a bit tight fitting and the morning light not so good."

We had walked across the hall and stepped into the long living room that ran almost the entire length of the house. I didn't have to ask her what she meant. Could she have seen me that morning? But most of all, did the Black Circle know, recognize me as I walked to the garage with Mrs. Clayburn?

However, I was spared the embarrassment of greeting the little lady in yellow—Mrs. Clayburn was not there. She and her husband no doubt had found new pleasures.

If Mrs. Townsend had expected me to add to the gayety of her dinner she must have been sadly disappointed. But Josey had lost none of her gayety—a hollow ring to her sallies, perhaps—a mirthless tone to her laugh—it struck me that way, anyway. The others did not seem to notice. But then, each one

talked about one's self—these were always occasions for self-glorification.

Most of my time was spent nodding and smiling and throwing "yes" and "no" back and forth, and up and down the table. Twenty-four guests—the cream of the fringe of society. A mighty babble—and once I had thought that it was life, and that I liked it.

Now—I looked for my man—a silent—nervous, white faced individual in the flushed, excited faces about me. But I did not find him. If he was there, for the time being he had forgotten his troubles, or—had the hope of the White Circle erased fear from his heart? The White Circle! Who was the White Circle?

I guess the food was good—well cooked—exquisitely served. At least I did not get indigestion—but then, I could eat a leather steak. So much for that. I ate what they put before me—but as to what it was, I never gave a thought. A quiet evening, eh. I clenched my hands beneath the table. A dozen times I attempted to get Josey in whispered conversation, and when I succeeded and brought the small talk to the biggest things in life, she dragged in a chinless youth on her other side.

The wine was the best—the vintage old—and the quantity not stinted. Hard, shrewd faces slipped into a cherublike serenity—there was an attempted speech or two as an exuberant spirit soared to the heights of oratory. Josey took nothing—the chinless youth

giggling like a school girl when she poured the contents of her glass into his.

As for me, I made no apologies—I took little of the stuff—passed it up without explanation or subterfuge. I know the game—labels can be made faster than liquor. Nearly every man in the crowd had a cellar full of the real old goods, though he scoffed at the possibility of his friend or neighbor possessing anything better than wood alcohol.

The dinner came to an end and the Townsend hospitality at these famous, exclusive affairs, came into prominence. A three-piece orchestra played for those who cared to dance—tables were laid out for the card fiends—the billiard room was lighted—poker chips stacked in neat piles. Even great French windows gave access to the moonlit lawn, if one, or rather, two sought a stroll through the shadows.

And two did. I made no bones about it after dinner—the men and women left the table together. I just took Josey by the arm and led her out the French windows and on to the lawn.

"Real caveman stuff." Her attempted gayety didn't register now.

"Josey." I think I shook her arm a bit. "After yesterday afternoon—well, you're different, you know."

"I called on you last night—almost early this morning." She looked straight up at me. "You asked me a question, Stacey—I decided to answer it."

"Yes?" I hardly breathed the word. "And what was your answer?"

"I was going with you—any place—anywhere—away from here. Now—" The tiniest shrug of smooth, bare shoulders.

"Now—" I encouraged her.

"I saw you this morning." She never dropped her eyes. "Oh, Stacey," two hands sought my shoulders and rested there, "I told you I loved you—believed in you—and I do want to—yet, I've seen so much—so little trust—and I've heard some pretty ugly things about Mrs. Clayburn."

"They were not true, Josey." I knew where she heard them—knew that she had taken a part in them—a dastardly part, too—but I tried not to think of that then.

"It's unkind of me, of course. But you'd forgive me if you knew—even partly guessed what I'm going through. And my coming to you in the night like that—it was hard, Stacey—yet I had to come. I didn't sleep at all last night."

I could believe that—but what of the day? There were no shadows under Josey's eyes—no deep rings anyway.

"Josey." It was my eyes that searched hers now. "I've heard some ugly things, too." I spoke impulsively. "You see, I heard that you were married."

"You didn't—they didn't dare!" Her face flashed with anger—then the red receded and a deadly white

took its place—a caution, too—the fleeting flash in her eyes that she had said too much—then a laugh, in which neither the eyes nor the lips participated. A grim sort of thing, if you've ever heard it.

I went on then—in no way giving my part in the activities of the White Circle away. But I told her of the visit of the clerk from Meyer & Meyer. It seemed impossible that she didn't know—or wouldn't know, anyway. For myself I didn't care. If the whole thing was a game to her, why, I'd let her play it.

There was no use to tell myself that she didn't have my heart—if she wanted to trample on it I was helpless to stop her. Cool headedness, common sense, shrewd training of years are useless things when love comes in. What the future would bring forth made little difference. I would drag her from the clutches of these people—yes—if it went to murder—cold blooded, premediated murder. Not a pretty thing to say about one's self, I'll admit. It was the truth, nevertheless—but Josey was talking.

"It would be like you, Stacey, to throw him out." She was nodding slowly—incessantly. "Of course, you didn't believe."

"No—I didn't, Josey." Then, "It isn't true?" You see, despite it all I did half believe.

Her head stopped nodding then—her eyes again held mine.

"I can't answer that question in words, Stacey." That stumped me. Not in words! There was a wealth

of feeling in her voice though. This love business sure was new to me—new and not understandable either.

"If you can't answer it in words—how then?" And when I made that innocent bit of a remark I didn't know what I was letting myself in for. But there was nothing tangible to go by. If I only knew who the one man was—the man who held this sinister influence over the girl—if I could take him by the throat and—

"You want an answer, Stacey?" She broke in upon my thoughts. "I don't know if I'm playing fair—playing the game—but I've tried so hard and not succeeded. Yesterday when you asked me to marry you—why—well, I thought that the dead stood between us—now, I guess we owe most to the living. There's a chance for happiness—and—" Suddenly her arms were flung out—about my neck—a tousled black head nestled on my shoulder—and Josey was crying, crying softly.

"You'll make me forget, Stacey—take me away from here—anywhere—out of the country—across the sea—oh—I want so to be happy—I want to—to forget. I haven't the strength to fight any longer—since you—make me forget—oh—forget the dead."

And I, too, felt the lure of the night—of Josey—the futile effort in a battle against the unknown. Just her last words—"Forget the dead." And though I held her in my arms, patted her head, kissed again and again

the lips that were raised to mine, I knew that the dead stood between us. I had made a promise—to a picture. I clenched my fingers until nails bit deeply into the flesh.

"Why don't you say something, Stacey? You—" a coaxing little voice—a hand that caressed my chin. "You—" a fearful little voice—a hand that suddenly tightened upon my neck. "You—" a frightened little voice and a hand that fell to her side as her body came erect and she faced me.

"You don't want to do it." Was it a question—merely a statement—an exclamation maybe—or was there an accusation, a denunciation, or both, in her voice—in the widening brown eyes that sought mine in the pale light of the moon?

"It isn't that, Josey." I spoke rapidly as I took her by the shoulders and held her from me at arms' length. "I love you, Josey," I said very slowly, "and—despite it all—that you keep from me—I believe in you, but—"

"But you've got a name to keep—something to uphold before this—oh, Stacey—and I thought that you were different." This time, despite her efforts, she did not get away. I held her firmly—I'd make her listen to all I had to say.

"You spoke of the dead, Josey—I'm not sure—but perhaps you mean just what I mean, when I say that I, too, owe something to the dead."

"You!" and her gasp of surprise was a real one. "No—not you—you couldn't understand—but now—I wouldn't marry you if you were—I wouldn't—I won't." Like a woman, I guess, but disconcerting just the same. "If you put me above everything—my love for you—it—yes, it was real—and—Stacey—why do you look at me like that?"

Then, her head close again, she was crying—and I—oh, I held an arm about her, but I tried to picture something different—sightless gray eyes—an agonized, upturned face—the protruding handle of a long steel knife—I think I shuddered. I didn't know that she was looking up at me.

"Why do you look at me like that—but you're right, Stacey—there's so much—much—"

Crunching feet along the gravel path to our right—a dull, narrow figure in the moonlight—and we parted. Too late to dodge him—the chinless youth who had taken so freely of Josey's wine was on us—smiling—bobbing up and down like a balloon on a string. Did it make any difference? Had he come at a bad time? I don't know—Josey and I weren't getting anywhere. She wouldn't trust me and tell me her whole miserable story. And I—I simply couldn't trust her—daren't question her too closely.

Her love for me might be a sincere thing, indeed—and yet be forgotten—insignificant when she stood in the presence of her master, the Black Circle. Innocent or guilty, what difference does it make—she was cer-

tainly in the arch fiend's grip, body and—I clutched my hand—turned as she strode off with the chinless tank—and wandered across the lawn. I couldn't stand for his babble.

CHAPTER XXIV

A SINGLE SHOT

AIMLESSLY I strode about the grounds—I didn't want to go back to the house yet—just wanted to pull off that thinking act which isn't in my line—but there are times when my mind won't rest—this was one of them. Josey couldn't or wouldn't tell me that she was already married. She had not denied the accusation that I had repeated to her.

So much for that—common sense would tell you that it was true then. But—and a very large *but*—in the very next breath she wanted to marry me and run away with me—and—

I had forgotten entirely the instructions of the White Circle—the man with the handkerchief in his hand—the back of the house. I think that I saw him before I sought the rendezvous—but involuntarily I had wandered far back of the house and come upon the little summer house—hidden, too. It must have been after eleven—the man was there—walking nervously back and forth—a familiar figure. He half turned—the moon shone full upon his face—and—I never would have guessed it. It was Robert T. Townsend.

Believe it myself—not at first. I sort of hung back in the protecting corner of the summer house. But the handkerchief was there—clutched in his left hand —now almost invisible—now fluttering in the gentle breeze. It sure looked like the real thing—poor Townsend. And he had been nervous at the club—I smiled slightly. He had also told me that his long suit was women.

No mask this time—the thing would be silly with Townsend. He'd know me. Of course I made certain of him—ducked out and over the grass, and came upon him from the other side—let him see the handkerchief before he recognized me. Not so strange when you think it over. Just the wonder they hadn't stretched out a hand and plucked Townsend from his security before—he'd sure find a Tartar in his wife if the truth came out, whatever it was.

My handkerchief flashed but once—hung there in my left hand, when he was on me—half running—half loping across the grass.

I bent my head lower—waited until he was on me, then raised my head and looked straight into his eyes. Startled—that lad sure had the surprise of his life.

"Mr. Lee! Mr. Lee!" The handkerchief went into his pocket like a flash—he half turned as though to retreat—recovered and faced me again. "I was expecting some one else, I think," he said, and his voice was hardly above a whisper.

"I think not." I shook my head and smiled. "You were expecting some one with—with this." I flashed out my handkerchief—held it so in my left hand a moment. It would have been funny if it hadn't been so tragic—but this huge beast of a man was probably no different than his brothers—he was just caught in the net, that was all—and I was paid to help him out. I came right down to business.

"I have been sent to you, Mr. Townsend. If you feel that one of your acquaintances shouldn't—well—I know nothing—only what you are to tell me. Perhaps—but there—I've come." After all, why be silly about it. He needed me.

"I appreciate it, Mr. Lee—appreciate it very much—it's more than one has a right to expect from another in these days of—keen business—money grabbing interest, I might say." Beadlike eyes sought mine, then fell to the grass. "There's a lot to tell you—I suppose—but—you'll excuse me. I was told to make sure—a token, I think it was." His feet scraped back and forth; the usual self-assurance of the man was entirely missing.

I nodded—thought that I knew what he meant—dug a hand into my pocket—lifted his great flabby right hand and slapped a seal into it. He started somewhat as he looked down at the circle of white on his palm—then:

"You are—this man who has been talking to me—

on the phone—the White Circle, himself?" Very low, then louder and in a nervous voice, "The White Circle?"

"No." I laughed slightly. This big ox was frightened through and through. "But I'm to help if I can —I—" We swung around together.

Sharp and clear came the report of a pistol—hard to locate in the night, but from the hedge, I thought. I pushed Townsend half behind the house—followed —then stopped. There was a frightened call from somewhere near the big house, then—toward the hedge —the direction of it unmistakable this time; the scream of a woman—and, yes—a warning shout, but intermingled with a cry of terror.

Townsend was forgotten—the White Circle not even in my head. Gun out—body bent low. I was running—fairly flying across the grass—through the trees and toward the hedge. In that cry I recognized the voice of Josey Mears.

Was some one following me? Did I hear the heavy panting for breath—a hoarse voice encouraging me or warning me? I thought so—Townsend was on my heels. Good that—if I had thought about the matter at all, it was that he'd be going the other way. It was only a few feet. The moon was bright—generous then—distinctly, on the other side of the hedge, I saw two figures struggling. And one was a girl.

I didn't dare to fire. Oh, I'm a good shot all right

—but two figures swinging about—first, the outline of the girl—then, the man—then, the two of them so close that their forms could not be distinguished one from the other—was no shot for a running man—especially if he was in love with the woman who still struggled in the moonlight.

The hedge was too high to vault—not time enough to slip carefully through it, so I just charged it—hurled my body half sidewise against the thick barrier. Through all right—scratched slightly, I emerged on the other side—half stumbled—regained my balance. A white fist flashed high for a moment—came down upon the forehead of the girl and I saw her slip silently to the grass on the edge of the unlighted country road.

No thought for the man at first—just the girl—so still—so white there in the moonlight. Then her head moved from side to side—her breath came in short, uneven gasps—she opened her eyes a moment—sighed and closed them again. I half turned—saw the fleeing figure entering a clump of trees—appearing again framed upon a high stone wall.

Good—right knee on the ground—right hand across my left knee, I steadied my gun—just a second only—but that second would be enough. That man who had struggled with Josey and so brutally beaten her to the ground would tumble from that wall. Never a doubt

of that—I had drawn a bead on my man and I don't miss.

My finger closed about the trigger—one of his legs swung over the wall and I pressed it. A sharp report, the spurt of orange blue flame, and I knew that I had missed—a huge foot had brushed against my arm—a nervous hand was clutching at my shoulder. Townsend, the clumsy idiot, had stumbled against me in his haste, knocked my gun aside. I looked again toward that wall—nothing now—the man had dropped to the other side and disappeared.

No use to call Townsend for his clumsy act. He was running about now, muttering to himself—asking me over and over if the girl were dead. I doubt if he even looked closely enough at her to know who she was. Then came another. The chinless youth—slightly sobered—white of face—and with the inane monotone that he thought he had heard a shot.

It was I who took charge of the situation. I wasn't sure just what I suspected. But I cautioned them all to silence until I could get at the bottom of the matter. Townsend, I left, would keep still—there were enough things to bother him. Undoubtedly, from his action, he connected the shooting up with an attempt to take his life. The chinless man was the one whose talk I feared.

"Not a word," I told him as I lifted Josey in my arms. "You were with her last—a pretty escort—a

pretty story, too, if it gets out. How far are we from the house?" I put the question to Townsend.

"Some distance—four hundred yards—a little more perhaps." And then getting my idea, "I doubt if the shot would be heard—unless others were on the grounds."

"Any house near here?"

"No." A hand stroked his chin—another swept over his forehead. "Behind the wall over there." He pointed in the direction in which the man had fled. "Well up, though—it's a big estate, you know."

I didn't know—but I nodded as I started toward the house. Then Josey came to again—struggled lightly—opened her eyes—shivered a bit—clung tightly to me a moment—tried to smile—and spoke.

"Let me down, please—I'm all right now—more frightened than anything else—oh, Stacey." And she began to cry.

Townsend fully recovered then for the first time—was all attention—interested—anxious to find out just what had happened. As for the chinless youth, he came close—moved away—muttered something and suddenly started on a run toward the distant lights of the stone house. That was enough—Townsend and I both guessed the truth—looked at each other above the head of the girl. But it was I who spoke.

"He frightened you—attempted to make love to you?"

"Oh, you mustn't blame him." Josey turned first

to me, then—to Townsend. "He—was too attentive, that was all—you see, I wanted to get away from him —I ran—found a hole in the hedge—and bumped right into the man with the gun."

"Was he—did he aim at you—threaten you—or—just what did he do?" Townsend was entirely interested in his own skin. To him came thoughts of the Black Circle, I guess. To me, too—but there was a sticker there. Had that shot been meant for Josey or for Townsend or for me? Townsend, I thought I could eliminate. He was a paying customer—no good dead—an asset alive.

As for me—they couldn't know me. And even if they did, how could a man recognize my shoulders there in the dim light—thirty or forty feet away? Josey then—the man had been looking for Josey. Why? But I'd give her a chance to recover before she was questioned further. It wouldn't do to let Townsend even suspect for a moment that she was of the Black Circle that now threatened him.

"A tramp or a burglar." I tried to make my voice sound light—my words assuring. "I think we can keep the thing from those in the house. You can notify the police in the morning, you know, Mr. Townsend. No reason to alarm any one."

And he jumped at my conclusion. I doubt if he believed the burglar idea, but he wanted to—agreed that we say nothing—just a word to the police in the morning.

"Keep the whole miserable thing out of the papers," he gurgled. So we three walked slowly toward the house. Josey was a bit wabbly—nothing more—her dress she straightened out as best she could. It was torn slightly—her hair disheveled—and but one mark, a red bruise in the center of her forehead. She caught me looking at her and tried a smile. Pluck was no name for her.

"When I fix my hair you won't see it. I'll slip in the back way—I know the house pretty well." We were at the house now—Townsend and I watched her go in—then, without a word, we turned and entered the front door. Had he forgotten my business there—no—for he turned as we passed through the door.

"We'll arrange a talk later, Mr. Lee—and—" He mopped his forehead with a great silk handkerchief. "You're a brave man—I'm very fortunate." A minute later we were both mingling with the guests. The chinless youth was nowhere to be seen. I had nothing particular against him—a weak sister—but I did wish to have a few well chosen words with him—nothing more. Careful questioning informed me that he had suddenly departed—good enough.

Things work funny at one of these affairs. It had been booked for pretty late going, and while no one knew exactly what had happened the party appeared to be dampened. That something had gone wrong was at least suspected. The guests thinned out quickly. It was then that Townsend drew me aside.

"You'll stay after the others?" he asked anxiously. "We'll talk."

"I'll take Miss Mears home first." I nodded. "Then I'll come back."

"Miss Mears." His eyes went up. "She's been gone an hour—Mrs. Townsend sent her home in one of the cars. I didn't think—"

Of course he didn't think. I knew that. He never would. For the moment I was almost glad that he was the victim of the Black Circle's latest outrage. But my feeling of dislike passed almost at once. This was business. Townsend couldn't know the feeling I held for the girl—one thing was certain though. Tomorrow would end it. I'd have a straight talk with Josey—get the truth from her somehow.

It was Townsend's desire that I keep our meeting hidden even from his wife. He suggested that I dismiss my car—return to the house—be let in his little side door—and we'd talk after all had gone to bed.

"I want you with me to-night," he said. "I'm expecting a visitor." He half looked behind him as he spoke.

As for me, I shrugged my shoulders. It was all in the game. Each step I took against the Black Circle —each piece of information that I picked up—brought me nearer to the leader—nearer to that one hundred thousand dollar face. But most of all, nearer to Josey. What the White Circle expected to do once he had his information I didn't know. Didn't bother with.

It might be then that the police would be called in. It might be altogether a personal matter with—I shuddered slightly. One thing was certain. Josey would be free. I'd see to that and no mistake.

CHAPTER XXV

A LATE VISIT

I LEFT the house, dismissed my hired car, and took a bit of a walk along the countryside. I had an hour to kill and I spent it looking about the place. Not a sound but the soft purring of a gentle wind through the first touch of spring in the trees. If any one lurked about that house he was well hidden. Nervous? I don't know. I smoked numberless cigarettes though. I wanted to hear Townsend's story—find out how he met or communicated with these blackmailers.

Surely, some place there must be a weak link—some of the gang who knew or at least suspected the real identity of the leader. I clenched my hand—thought and thought—and nothing came of it. Would it after all have to be blind luck that would make me stumble on a solution to my problem? A real problem now—with a wedding perhaps at the end of it.

It was nearly two when I returned across the grass to the house—tapped lightly on the little side door, to have it opened almost at once by Townsend. There was relief in his face as well as his voice when he spoke.

"I thought—thought you had deserted me." He

snapped out his watch. "Come in—sit there—smoke." He flopped into a chair beside me—rose again almost at once and paced up and down the room.

"How much must I tell you?" He turned suddenly.

"About yourself, as little as you wish—about them, as much as you know."

"One thing only." He stroked his head. "Why do you do this—for me? Who is behind you? The thing seems unbelievable."

"Of that I am not at liberty to tell you. It is enough that I am sent here to help you—save you from exposure—expense, too, if possible. To-night I expected little more than a talk."

"I see, I see." He paced rapidly up and down. It was plain that he did not see at all. "And I thought you just one of the idle rich. It was not your voice on the phone then?" That was the second time he asked that question.

"Not my voice on the phone, no." Certainly he wanted a lot of information—explanations, when the thing was costing him nothing—suspicion—that was what I read in his eyes.

"You are not then—the leader?"

"I am not then the leader." I echoed his words.

A moment's pause—then:

"Will I, perhaps see him?"

"I think not." A moment's pause then from me. "You didn't see the leader of these others?"

"Not his face, no—for he wore a mask. But it is

the leader who hounds me—who else?" He suddenly turned, brought his fist down upon the table. "Man, the thing is big—a half million—no less—do you understand—a cool five hundred thousand dollars. It will—well, very nearly wipe me out." Again his caution not to let me know too much about his life.

This man wouldn't trust any one. I didn't care about that. Nor the money either. The amount was a stiff one, a huge sum. Of a certainty they had something real on this bore, something that would shake his business as well as his social position—and with him the two went linked together. But what interested me the most—brought me upright in my chair—was the assurance in his voice when he spoke of seeing the leader.

"You don't need to give me the reason for this blackmail, Mr. Townsend." The relief in his face was funny to see. "I guess it's real enough. Now, this leader—you think you have seen him—where?"

"A lonely house up in Crestwood. I have been there twice."

It was my turn to open my eyes. Here were real facts.

"But this man—how did he look?" And I listened attentively—bent forward, awaiting his answer.

"He wore a black mask—but he was big—not so tall as I—nor as broad, I think. He wore a cap, you see, and I—"

"His voice, man—his voice?"

" A deep guttural voice—shrill at times—but I think it was disguised."

I nodded—that was it. Here was a man who had talked with the real Black Circle—the masked man I had faced up in those grounds at Crestwood, with but a few inches between us—guns drawn—each ready to kill the other. What a fool I had been! Why hadn't I played the game—pretended to listen to that false clerk from Meyer & Meyer—spoken of wealth—perhaps, too, have had an interview?

"When will you see him again?" I knew that my voice shook with interest. If there was enough money in it the Black Circle took personal charge of the case, it seemed.

"I am to hear from him to-night—that is, this morning—I'm to wait here. He's coming to the house."

I came to my feet. Here was a daring move, indeed. To beard a man right in his own home—threaten him while his wife slept above—a half dozen servants were within calling distance, and for all the Black Circle knew—a dozen detectives might lurk in the shadows. Then my spirits fell. Of a certainty the Black Circle could not be coming in person.

I told my fears to Townsend. But he shook his head. "I have never spoken to any one but this masked figure—since the first few days, when a stranger approached me in my office."

"Has he ever been to your house before?"

Townsend didn't answer at once. He seemed to think it over—only a second, you understand, but the impression was there that he weighed his answer. Just a careful man, maybe.

"No—he has never been to my house. I am desperate, Mr. Lee—I can't tell you just what it is that he holds over my head—I can't. But how you can help me, I don't know."

"Are there any letters?" I was all eagerness now—tried to be all business, too. My instruction from the White Circle had been very meager indeed. In fact, there had been no order to act—just meet the man and listen—perhaps assure him that when the time came we would help.

"Letters—why, yes—how did you know?" And his surprise was a childish thing. I guess there always were letters.

"Will the return of these letters fix things—make the story these, or this, blackmailer could tell, a worthless thing?"

"Why, no—I think not. You see, the White Circle—the one who has telephoned me—said, or believed, that I could lead him or you to the leader of this gang that call themselves the Black Circle. I'm confused slightly, Mr. Lee—but I believed that was the price you or they were receiving for aiding me. For some reason or other you wanted to meet this man—recognize him."

And not a bad thought, either, when you look at it.

For once Robert T. Townsend had gotten words of real wisdom off his chest. When I nodded he appeared greatly relieved. His life was money—he couldn't see my place in the scheme of things—now, when he figured out that we, or I, as he so prettily put it, would have the leader in our hands, to punish or shake down or do whatever ran through that head of his, he was satisfied. Something for nothing didn't register in that brain.

"What will you do with this leader when you meet him—recognize him? And if you arrest him—you are not from the law—I understand that."

"Don't you worry about that, Mr. Townsend," I said easily. Personally I didn't have the slightest idea what the White Circle intended to do with him. As for me—well—I'd throw a fear into his soul that he'd never forget. Would I kill him?

It's hard for a man to sit down and make himself believe that he'd cold-bloodedly murder another. I thought that I could with pleasure—but I knew that I wouldn't—couldn't. Hard to understand that—but I can't explain it. Sometimes we hate people enough to kill them. That's human nature. But we never do. That's human nature too.

"But I do worry." His eyes were upon me—shrewd eyes that studied my face. "You know this man who calls himself the White Circle, of course?"

A bad time to plead ignorance then.

"Of course." I lied simply. What else could I say?

"And your finding him—unmasking this other—how will that protect me?" He watched me closely—selfish brute—careful one, too, I guess. But I knew the answer to that one. And I gave it to him.

"The threat of exposure will protect you." I had only one interest then—to face the leader—the Black Circle. And then, partly for my own benefit and partly to change the subject—for a lad who had some one stepping in to save him, he certainly did want a lot of information—I questioned him.

"You are sure—the masked leader—this man you have met—is coming here—to-night—this morning?"

"Two thirty." He pulled out his watch and clicked back the case. "Ten minutes more. He will come alone—I'll let him in that little door."

Nice to believe, that—I tried to, and yet I didn't. Would he walk into a trap? Wouldn't this leader know that I was there—suspect that others might be? Had he watched the house—was it his man who had hidden by the hedge? Why— And Townsend broke in upon my thoughts.

"About Josey Mears," he said suddenly. "Strange, that man—you didn't see his face—was he dark—was he a foreigner?"

I looked quickly at him. Had that thought been in my mind? Did I gulp slightly when I spoke?

"I didn't see him—didn't notice him." Did I show surprise at his question? There was at least nervousness in my speech.

"It pays a man to mind his own business, Mr. Lee—always. Now you are interested in Josey Mears. Is that so?"

I tried to keep the earnestness out of my voice, made it ring with indifference.

"So, so—a charming girl." And I smiled—but this time I did not meet his eyes.

"More than that." His head moved rapidly—his chin striking up and down on his chest. "I saw your face—your interest at the club when I mentioned her name. However, that is your business. If you are not overinterested in the girl—why, forget Josey Mears."

"What do you mean?" I was looking at him straight enough now. A threatening attitude too, perhaps, though I did not mean it as such.

"Tut, tut." He stepped back a pace. "You are befriending me—for your own interest or mine, it does not matter—I simply wish to warn—rather, repay you."

"Mr. Townsend," I spoke very slowly, "you have said too much or too little—just what do you mean?"

"There, there—not minding my own business. As you say, Josey is a charming girl—for ones—my friend." His pudgy hand came up and gripped the one that I suddenly placed upon his shoulder. Then, when he saw the anger in my eyes—read my purpose of forcing an answer from him, he spoke—half defiantly—half sorrowfully, I thought.

"I should not have spoken." There was a gruff ring to his voice. "Josey Mears is married. That was her husband who was there to-night."

"That's a lie." My words just shot out without thought behind them—then more quietly, "Who has told you this—lie?"

"That's a better way of putting it." And the first flush of anger receded from his fat cheeks. "I forgive you, my boy—I forgive you. I did not believe that the thing was so deep. And who has told me? I met and talked with her husband—only this afternoon. He is a client of mine."

Blood red wrath again? No. There would be no purpose in Townsend telling me this. And Josey—she had not—

"If you had asked her she would have told you. Josey is unfortunate—not bad, you understand."

If I had asked her she would have told me! The words rang in my ears. I had asked her and she had not told me.

"Townsend—" I am glad I didn't finish—not that I know now what I was going to say—but the telephone—just buzzed there on the desk—for the first time I saw the bit of cardboard. It had been slipped in behind the bell. But the buzzing came clearly enough—I stopped dead—Townsend and I both turned toward the phone. Startled? I dare say he was the calmer of the two of us as he raised his hand—then jerked the receiver from the hook.

A moment of silence—then his low voice.

"Yes—Townsend speaking." Queer stuff, this one-sided telephone call. "Not here—where then?" Disappointed. "I can't—" Silence, then less emphatic, "I'd prefer not to." Another interval. "I'll be there —yes, alone. Good." The face that he turned to me was drawn and white.

"My God!" he said, "I've got to pay. They know about the White Circle." He just slumped into a chair and buried his great bull-like head in his arms. A powerful organization, that. What they held over Townsend's head was something real all right.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE RENDEZVOUS WITH EVIL

Was I going to lose then—miss, just when I felt sure the opportunity to unmask this depraved vulture was within my grasp? I shook Townsend by the shoulders—got him to his feet—watched him go to the cabinet back of the bookcase and pour himself a stiff drink—twice he raised the fiery liquid to his lips. It was not till then that he offered the bottle to me. I shook my head—took the bottle from him as he would have chased down another, and made him talk.

"They want money—want it to-night. Know about you—or at least about the White Circle. I've got to meet him—him, the Black Circle—by three thirty this morning—a lonely house near Riverdale Avenue. I know the house well—my God!" He clapped a huge pudgy hand to his head. "They could murder me there and no one be the wiser. But I must go—alone. Give me that bottle."

I held the bottle behind my back while I talked, tried to make him listen, reason it out with me. We'd go together. I was armed—there was a good chance yet. Did he think that the Black Circle would be there in

person? Yes, he knew that he would, and he wanted him to bring cash—ten thousand, at once.

"I have it here," he stammered, "hoping that I wouldn't have to use it. They'll ruin me. They have no hearts—no conscience."

I believed that all right, but I wanted to map out a plan of battle—wanted to know where that phone call had come from. Was there a phone in the old house? Did he think that they had arrived there yet? How long would it take us to reach there? Could we make it ahead of them? If not, did he think that he would be able to signal me from a window? When he saw my determination to fight it out, he began to nod and listen to me. Then, when he thought of the money, he actually became enthusiastic.

"I tell you." He swung suddenly around and faced me—a thick finger planted firmly against my chest. "If you kill this man you shall have the ten thousand dollars—every penny of it." He stepped to the little safe in the corner, spun the dial, and jerked it open. When he faced me again a thick stack of crisp new bills was in his hand.

"You can keep the money—as far as I'm concerned, Mr. Townsend," I said. Was there a certain disgust in my voice—did I resent being taken for a hired murderer? I did, and showed it. Funny! I guess so. For days now I had been actually planning the death of this man. As for the money—oh—I was working for the White Circle, not for him. The final words I

just gulped out. "I'm not a murderer." My voice was very low—but steady just the same.

His piglike little eyes were on me—his nervous fingers ran through the bills—then he spoke.

"Given the chance—you wouldn't shoot this man?" Was there an air of finality in his voice? If I admitted that, would he turn from his purpose of taking me with him? Civilization had slipped back—for the moment I read the beast in the man's eyes—the slightest movement of his tongue as he involuntarily licked dead lips. And his eyes—they pierced—watched to read the answer in my face before I spoke the words.

But I told him the truth.

"It may be that I shall kill him," I said—somehow I thought that I would. "But I can't just shoot him down—if in protecting you, or myself, or—" I stopped dead. I was thinking again of Josey.

He held his hands out before him—juggled the bills from one to the other—seemed to weigh them or my words in his outstretched hands, but he finally nodded.

"Nevertheless you are a brave man—and I want you with me. From what I have seen of this man, he will not be taken alive." Another moment of steady scrutiny, then, "Come!"

Three minutes later we were walking together through the night. No word passed between us as we legged it over the country road—ten, fifteen minutes at the most, and we stopped. Dimly I made out the dilapidated contour of a great wooden house. In the

shadow of the trees we paused. It was Townsend who spoke—and I who listened.

"I have been in the house before—there are five windows along the back. The fourth window, counting from the south, will be my place to signal you."

Heads together now, we laid our plans. Townsend was to step briskly down the road—let himself in at the big front door, which he was sure would be open—then he would search the house—listen for sounds. If it was empty he would show a light in that back room window, on the second floor. There I would join him.

"Just behind a shed in the back of the house is the ladder," he whispered, as we stood there by the side of the road, hidden in the shadows of two great trees. Then, with a touch of conscience, "Perhaps you'd better wait—they're desperate men—one can't tell how many are coming."

But I was determined to go through with it. If the Black Circle was to get money—come there, masked and unknown even to his own gang, he would no doubt bring as few with him as possible—besides, I clutched at my gun, I wanted a look at that hundred-thousand-dollar face—wanted to look into those eyes that had caused so many suicides, and lately even murders. I set my teeth grimly.

"You have a gun, Mr. Townsend?"

He hesitated a moment before he answered—then:

"Yes, I have." Another pause. "Always they have searched me—some one who has come before the leader

—since that first night I have not carried a pistol—now I'm doubtful."

So was I. That was something to think over. My idea was to hide in the house—listen in on the conversation, much as I had done with Mrs. Clayburn—attack suddenly, in the same manner, too. Yet, in case of sudden surprise, two guns were better than one. After some discussion it was decided that he had best keep his gun.

If they searched him and found it before I acted, his excuse for carrying it would be a good one. Ten thousand dollars on a lonely road—in the dark hours of the morning. Good. I held out a hand and took his as we parted.

Together we raised our eyes and looked at the dismal building, outlined against the blackness of the night. Not a light in a window—not a moving shadow upon the whole countryside.

"You can count on me absolutely, Mr. Townsend," I told him as he turned toward the house. "If they're hidden inside—if they surprise you in the dark, it doesn't matter. If you don't signal me I'll come to you anyway—come if I have to crash in the front door." And I meant it.

I watched his huge bulk move back on the road—roll slowly down it and turn in at the broken wooden gate that stretched across the entrance. His figure disappeared for a moment behind the trees—shot into view again as he neared the front steps, and was swal-

lowed entirely in the blackness as he climbed the steps and crossed the great old-fashioned veranda.

Eyes strained to pierce the blackness—glued upon the distant windows that faintly outlined themselves against the dead monotony of the old house, I waited.

No sudden burst of light that told me that others lurked within. Then a flash—a tiny flicker—a match in the darkness—that would be Townsend. I half snapped my fingers—I hadn't thought to ask if he had a flash light—hadn't thought of giving him mine. But I shook my head at that.

If the others were already waiting there in the darkness, to suddenly step out upon him—I would need my flash—need it badly when I sought entrance, probably through a cellar window. But his entrance to the house with no responding glare of light that would tell of the presence of others was my cue. I slipped carefully along from tree to tree, making my way to the back of the house.

The shed was easily found, and Townsend certainly knew the ground, for the ladder was planted alongside the little outhouse—I couldn't miss it. Ready, by the ladder, I watched that window. I had thought of waiting and following him in the front door, but there was danger to that. The front door might be watched from across the country road—this was at least the best plan.

And the light came—the flicker of a match only—revealing no figure through the dust and dirt of the

window. Then a steadier glare for a moment as he lighted the gas or a candle—after that sudden darkness. Townsend had drawn down a shade. Good—silently I carted the ladder to the house—placed it against the upper ledge of the window and climbed rapidly.

A scratch on the window—a moment's wait—the squeaky thud of a rusty lock—the groaning of wood—and the window jerked upward—slowly, but at length high enough for a man to crawl beneath.

CHAPTER XXVII

A BLOW IN THE DARK

A BAD moment as I hung there—half through the window, framed clearly in the light if eyes were watching. Somewhat of a fool, this Townsend—but I slipped through, turned quickly and with a single thrust sent the ladder spinning back upon the soft grass. Then, closing the window, I pulled down the shade and faced Townsend—my gun clutched tightly in my hand. Yep, I had come through the window, gun first—the surprise on Townsend's face was ludicrous to see.

"Let us not waste any time," I told him. "You know this house—where will be the place of meeting—the most likely place—the best equipped room—will there be a place for me to hide?"

"Exactly." He nodded. "Downstairs—a table and three comfortable chairs—also a closet in the back that you can—"

"Not me," I shot in on him. "No closet door to be suddenly snapped close on me—I'll have to find a better place to hide."

"But there is no door to this closet—you can crouch in the back—it's stacked with books and papers—be-

hind them you can remain unseen and watch and listen."

That was the ticket. I nodded. Put two guns in my hands—let me get my back to a wall, and I'd fight it out with a dozen of them—give a good account of myself, too. For the first time since that night at Crestwood came the old-time thrill—a longing for action. Probably no more than three would come. I could just step out—stick them up—slip a gun to Townsend, if his had already been taken—just snatch that mask from the hidden face and mark my man.

At least the White Circle was convinced that one glance at that face would end forever the activities of this notorious but unknown man. As for me, it would settle the persecution of Josey Mears—and make me the richer by one hundred thousand dollars. Josey Mears—what of her now?

I shook my head—chased out such thoughts at such a time—and followed Townsend from the room, into a musty hall.

"No flash." He warned me, though I had no such intention. "I know this house—just place a hand upon my shoulder and follow."

I did—my hand that held the gun shot up—the muzzle rested against his cheek for a minute and I heard his exclamation of fright—relieved, too, when my low laugh reassured him. For a moment he must have thought that the enemy had suddenly materialized there

in the blackness and stuck the cold nose of a forty-four against his face.

Four steps—five—six we took, when it happened. I heard the roar first—saw the lead cut the blackness later. Without warning—without a sound—out of the darkness below the orange-blue forewarning of death had shrieked its message.

My gun swerved the fraction of an inch, pointed downward over Townsend's shoulder, and my finger half closed upon the trigger. In my game lead is answered with lead. There isn't any other way. I know this kind of fighting—nothing sneaky or underhand about that. You just shoot where the flash last came from. But Townsend's hoarse whisper held my fire.

"Quiet! They can't be shooting at us—trouble among them—back!" He was calm and cool now—there was something, after all, to admire in this man. Hardly understandable, either—these changeable moods of his. Abject terror one moment, grim determination another—and here a certain sort of courage.

I thought that he might be right. Not a word had passed between us—the candle had been extinguished before we left the room—our footfalls, a faint, hardly noticeable sound. Yes, it was possible that they had come in the front while I had climbed the ladder in the back. Perhaps this sudden shot—spurt of flame in the darkness—was the Black Circle's method of punishing a subject who had betrayed him or sought out his identity; trapping him like this in the lonely house.

These thoughts shot quickly through my head as I followed the lead of Townsend—turned quickly back —mounted the few steps to the hall above and with my hand still upon the broad, thick shoulder, tip-toed noiselessly down the hall. Once a board creaked. I would have paused, but the figure went on, in catlike quiet despite his great bulk.

A door opened softly ahead—I knew that we passed through it. Townsend's breath came again—gasps, like he had held it there in the hall and now sought relief for his aching chest. I stretched out a hand, felt of the door, gently closed it—no key. Bad stuff, this —and yet Townsend was right.

To have sent a bullet crashing harmlessly down those stairs would have availed me nothing—simply a message to the enemy that we were in the house—a message that might have sent them scurrying like rats to cover, somewhere out in the night.

There was the scratch of a match, the faint glow, reflected for a moment on the nickel of a revolver. I half raised my gun, laughed quietly, a little nervously, perhaps, as I recognized Townsend's white face above the gun. And in that moment before he turned away, I saw that his little eyes, now seemingly a vivid green, blazed like those of an animal.

"The door," he said huskily. "You shut it?"

"Yes." The match in his hand sputtered and went out, but a half used candle suddenly flickered, dimmed

slightly, and burst into flame upon a mantel that was thick with dust.

"We're in for it now, Lee." Townsend turned from the mantel and faced me—and the light in his mean little eyes was gone—they were two slits again as they turned to me. "They'll search the house."

"Looks like it." I reached into my pocket and dragged out my other gun. "But we'll have a go for it." Carefully I took in the room—not a closet—not even a piece of furniture—and, strangest of all, no window. But that was good—just the door to watch. Eyes ever on that door, I gave the room as careful an examination as possible. No hidden doors—no secret trap in the ceiling or in the floor.

"The candle, Townsend," I said at length. "Puff it out."

"But we'll have no light," he objected. "Suppose they come—we can't tell when they're at the door."

"They'll see our light through the keyhole, or a crack in the door," I told him. "We won't be able to see them, anyway, unless they search the house with a light, which is possible." Then I spread my arms far apart—a huge black forty-four stood out in each of them.

Townsend still objected.

"But if they come in the dark, just slip open the door, you won't see them, and—why, they could blaze away in the dark—hit one of us sure. I'm willing to fight. In a way I feel I've got you into this, but—"

"I'll be by the door," I nodded. I think I knew what was in his mind. It was bad enough to be trapped in this room—when even now silent, unscrupulous men, with drawn guns, might be mounting the stairs, but to be trapped there in the dark. To the uninitiated it was no doubt doubly fearful.

"You wouldn't just fire—at the door—if—it creaked even?"

"Oh, wouldn't I?" And that's the way I let him know how things stood. His mouth was open for more argument—far below, on the stairs, I thought I heard a board snap. Anyway you look at it, too much time had been wasted. I just let them get started again, when I walked across the room, blew out the candle, turned and faced the door.

"Not a word from now on," was my final caution. With that—silence. Behind me were bare walls—below, the even, hard floor, above, a torn ceiling showing in places the thick flooring that protected us. Only one way in—the door—now in the blackness both my guns were trained upon that single entrance. Trapped, eh? Well, I don't know.

Maybe I couldn't just kill in cold blood, but I could shoot low. A little thrill there, perhaps the leader himself would be my first victim. Good! This was my game now—my hand was steady, my fingers firmly upon twin triggers. Would I use them?

Just let some one open that door—through the darkness the dead gray eyes of the little old man looked up

at me. Uncanny that? No—I was easing up the old conscience for the shooting that would follow.

Nothing more—just the heavy breathing of Townsend—the slightest movement in the dark as he tried to find me, I guess. When the real test came he did not have the stomach for it. Once I heard him sigh, but I was straining my ears to pierce the deadly silence of the house without that door. Just a single shot—that was all, and—

I drew myself the straighter—just beyond the door an old board creaked—a message there. Our presence in the house was at least suspected, if not actually known. Some one lurked beyond the door. I wet my lips—things were going to break in a minute. No other step—nothing for a moment—the faintest click, hardly audible, but I got it.

The knob of the door was being turned—then a light—my eyes flashed to the floor, beneath the door—distinctly I saw it, a thin flash of yellow, flickering slightly, not an electric torch then, a candle more likely. I smiled at that, like an honest and foolish householder who looks for burglars with a light held well above his head.

Both my guns came forward now, rusty hinges had squeaked their warning, the light seemed to disappear from beneath the door, a long and ever-widening yellow glare shot from floor to ceiling, then more clearly things stood out—the door was opening. I could see the knob, the outline of half the door taking on a dull

brilliancy. A foot it opened, hesitated, swung back a bit, then steadied there.

Upon the wall appeared the gigantic figure of a man—a great shadow that brought an audible gasp from close behind me, as Townsend took in the shadow show. Were there two men? I thought so, though the figures were too bulky and indistinct to make sure. Of a certainty this could not be he who was called the Black Circle. Some novice was playing this game. Crouched there in the dark I watched the light, the swaying, shadowy bulk upon the wall and the space where soon a man would appear.

That light—it was a surprise to me all right—a move that looked like suicide for the man who held the candle. Then the candle slowly came into the room, illuminated the small chamber in a dull light, showing clearly the white hand and the dark sleeve of the man who held it.

Almost at the same instant another hand crept around the open door, for a moment I saw the black outline of a stub-nosed automatic—just a moment only —and I had fired.

Both my guns spoke at once, just a single sound as two speeding bullets went crashing through ten feet of space—no more—I couldn't have missed, and—

Did I see the candle fall—did the automatic clatter upon the hard boards? I'm not sure—I know the light went out, everything went black. Had there been an answering roar from the gun that was creeping

around that door? I don't know—just blackness—a terrible nauseating blackness and a frightful pain in my head. I think that I fired again, pressed madly upon the trigger. But only one thing is clear, my knees sagged, my hands fell to my sides and my brain refused to function. Into some yawning pit I tumbled —unconscious.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE $100,000 FACE—MASKED

JOSEY MEARS stood on the edge of a great boat and the wind and storm tore all around. Try as I might I could not reach her—I could see her swaying, clutching madly at the empty air as she sought to keep her balance. Why she didn't hear me shout to her—why she didn't turn and seek shelter in the cabin, I didn't understand. But somehow I couldn't move—and the words that I shouted came no louder than a whisper.

Then I saw it—a creeping figure—a huge figure—dressed all in black, it slunk across a deck—a deck that I suddenly noticed was red with blood—great hands, with clawlike fingers and long, sharp nails reached out —and—and—

The ship was gone, there was a hum of voices, a pain in my head, a light that seemed to hurt my eyes. The sun, eh? It must be morning. Then I came to, opened my eyes, blinked in the flash of light that shot down upon my face, was conscious of a great pain in my head. But my brain was clear—fairly clear—I had shot at that hand that held the candle and the one that held the gun, then something had struck me.

Voices now, talking low, one familiar. Where had

I heard it before? My head throbbed, I tried to raise a hand to rub it across my burning forehead, came bolt upright in the chair. I was bound hand and foot and trapped by the enemy—the Black Circle himself.

The voice now—I knew where I had heard it, the low guttural sounds, the shrill feminine note to it occasionally, when the disguised tone broke. A few nights before I had faced the owner of that voice on the grounds of the house at Crestwood.

Just what had happened in that room after I shot I could not tell. And suddenly with a touch of alarm came the thought: What had become of Townsend? I was responsible for him. Had I been shot or had I been struck down? But no use to try and figure then. I was in the hands of unscrupulous blackmailers and murderers.

They were whispering now—those in the room—I tried to peer through half-closed lids. My situation became clear to me. I was directly beneath a powerful reading lamp—an electric one, too—probably sixty watts—maybe more.

But dimly I made out other figures in the room—three men sat by a long table—shadowy at first, then I saw them move clearly. I think one was the man I had thrown in the lake at Central Park; another, a stranger, but it was the central figure that held me. No black mask this time, a thick black hood that covered his entire head and hung upon his shoulders, protecting his face, two slits for his eyes only.

A broad-shouldered man, thickset, but rather short for his bulk, I thought—at least, it struck me that way, though he was crouched upon the table—hamlike hands —hands, that was it — those hands were running through a great stack—of money. Townsend's money—the crisp, new bills that crackled beneath his touch. Was Townsend dead—murdered?

They were not looking at me—the other two, at least —but the hooded one might have been, for he whispered to the stranger on his right—a man of thirty, sharp features, jet black hair, cold eyes that seemed large, accentuated perhaps by the light from which I looked into the shadows.

It was the wide-eyed man who spoke—slowly, hesitating between each sentence, listening to and repeating the whispered words of the hooded figure.

"You have a hard head, Mr. Lee—bullets carrom off it—very hard—and thick, too." A smile then—more a sneer. So it was a bullet then, but I doubted that, I had seen no answering flash—more likely, something had been hurled at me, or a man dropped from the room above. Yet I had examined that ceiling. A shot! Impossible, and yet for some purpose they wished to make me believe that. Why? But I could not think then—my head was buzzing—going around and around.

"What of Townsend?" I heard myself asking. That was what bothered me most then, I guess—the words just slipped out.

A moment of silence while the hooded head leaned closer to the other, then:

"Townsend is alive and well—we are not displeased with you for bringing him here—he thinks you dead, and will be responsive—amicable. But you have no further interest in him—it is with us you must talk."

"What do you want of me?" My voice was hoarse, but not from fear—I wanted water. And when the three heads raised and looked at me—speculatively—figuring, no doubt, that I was in fear—I put my desire for water into words. Almost at once the third man at the table rose, stepped out of the room a minute, and returned with a tumbler of water that he held to my lips.

His eyes were on me as I drank—hatred blazed out of them—he was thinking of the ducking in the lake, I dare say, and when I had finished he jammed the glass so hard against my mouth that it cut my lips, but I said nothing. I felt better now—I actually winked up at him. It was plain he had nothing to do with the final disposing of me—twice he had opened his mouth to speak and closed it again.

Evidently he was afraid of his hooded master, for his eyes would half shoot over his shoulder toward the black figure—then back to me.

I didn't think they intended to kill me, for why the silence from the leader? Fear that I might recognize his voice? If so, I had run across him some place. But if they did not propose murdering—another

thought—not a pleasant one. Perhaps the Black Circle did not speak because he feared recognition by the man who brought me water—was not even known to this man.

That wouldn't do, though, he had been talking when I came to—whispering with them, at least, one of them—the one he now leaned so close to. But what was the use? I couldn't figure it out—that I was helpless in their hands was enough—too much. The wide-eyed youth was talking again.

"Mr. Lee, you have your choice between life and death—how pleasant a future life rests with you—how unpleasant a death rests with us. We wish to know, who is the White Circle?"

"The White Circle!" I tried to act surprised, put a little gasp of wonder into my voice, but it only brought a smile—the gleaming of white, well-kept teeth from the speaker.

"Let us not waste time nor play with words. The other night in a house in the Nineties two men were killed—you killed one of them. We know that. We ask for no admission or denial. You fled next door, hid with the Clayburns, and left in the early hours of the morning."

Did my face change color—or was it already a ghastly white? At least, I felt the flush of red dash to it—hot blood—that seemed to turn cold almost at once, leaving me a weak, trembling creature. Fear of discovery—thought of my own danger? No, just the

one thought—Josey Mears had betrayed me. How else could they know? And hadn't she seen me leaving the house? Didn't she tell me so herself?

I'm not a fool, I had known there was bad in her—must have been bad, to make her associate with such scoundrels, but I never dreamed that she would send me to my death and—by Heavens! I didn't know—raised my head again, though the light hurt, I faced them, held my eyes straight upon the speaker. The black hood was close to his ear—the huge, black, somber head almost upon his shoulder.

They did not read my thoughts—could not understand that. They thought they read the fear of the truth in my face—my effort to recover.

"Is that all?" I asked. One thing they hadn't mentioned—about the house in Crestwood. Did they know that? Perhaps not, but it made little difference now. And the very next words of the speaker convinced me that I was wrong in that supposition.

"You made a visit to Crestwood, too—killed a man there—doubly your life is forfeited, yet we offer you freedom. Just this—" He leaned forward. "Give us the name of this man who is called the White Circle." His voice was eager—the expression on his face intense, but it was the black-hooded man who held my attention.

His head, too, bent over the table, and even in the emptiness of jet black cloth and the slits that gave only the hollow impression of eyes, I could feel the interest

—the passionate desire with which he hung upon the words that he hoped—felt sure—I would speak.

I thought but a moment before I answered. If I had to die, I would protect as best I could the man I worked for—and would no doubt die for. I expected little mercy from these vultures—that hooded spawn of hell.

"The White Circle is dead." I tried to make my tone convincing—at least, give the impression that I believed what I said. "And you," I added, "you killed him!" Although I directed my speech to the spokesman of the three, my eyes shot their accusation at the narrow slits in the hood.

The silent leader's hand raised and crashed upon the table with a dull thud. He came half to his feet, his finger raised toward me, then dropped back into his seat again, whispering hoarsely—the dull rumble of his angry voice reached me. The spokesman nodded steadily as he listened, then he turned to me.

"We know that you have lied—that this fool who calls himself the White Circle still lives. Now choose! Life or death—time passes."

"If he lives I do not know it." I shrugged my shoulders. I was satisfied now that there was no escape for me one way or the other. I'd taunt them a bit at the last if I could.

"Then why did you come to Townsend to-night? Why did you tell him you were from the White Cir-

cle? How did you know that he—had done something indiscreet?"

"I knew that before the White Circle died." That was the truth to a certain extent—at least, I knew that I was to meet a man.

"All lies." It was the hooded figure who jumped to his feet. The White Circle was not such a farce then —that tiny white seal—that invisible hand that had stretched through the window and saved my life the night before had thrown consternation, if not actual fear, into the heart of the leader of this insidious organization.

But the hooded figure spoke quickly—croaked sometimes like a frog—again lisping his words with the shrill, birdlike notes of a hysterical woman, but more often the deep guttural notes, and always came the impression that he spoke well down in his throat. A disguised, thick voice, certainly, but the passion, the hatred, and the anger of the man could not be hidden as he leaned upon the table, shot the partially muffled words at me from beneath the hood.

"All lies," he said again, and through his passion was always the self-control that hid the naturalness of his voice. "Townsend talked before he left here. It didn't take much pressure." And in the second's pause I think that he chuckled beneath the hood: "He was a wise man—told us how you had come to him, the handkerchief held in your hand, your promise to help him, and your admission that you only worked for

this—White Circle." A pretended scorn in his voice there—a scorn which I was sure he did not feel.

"Now"—a hand shot out as the voice reached a shrill note—"you tell us who this White Circle is—or—" A snap of a thick finger and thumb.

I looked up at him and laughed; he really did make a ludicrous figure there, now that he was bent forward, partly in the light.

"Friend," my voice was calm enough. Why not? I didn't see a chance, Stacey Lee had come to the end of his rope; "I am the White Circle."

"You—you!" Real scorn this time. "You are a fool."

I tried to peer through those slits in his hood; the odd man at the table had raised his head and looked at him now, the same thought struck both of us, I think, there seemed to be a natural ring to the voice. Nothing particular, and yet—

"Will you speak?" The guttural notes again. And my final answer.

"I am speaking, all the talk you want." Somehow there came a little thrill of pleasure in goading this man on. Also I was learning something—oh, I suppose I'd take it to my grave with me, but distantly in my subconscious mind there was a light, and yet—oh, the thought was impossible.

The great bulk came around the table now, across the room and leaned over me, very close, I could feel

the eyes—not see them exactly—feel them, if you know what I mean.

His body bent so far forward that there seemed a hump to his back—real or assumed or just round shoulders was hard to tell. And he limped when he walked, only slightly, but noticeably, of that I was sure.

Still I smiled up at him, expecting any moment to see a hand reach into a pocket of his black coat and draw forth a knife. My thoughts then—my thoughts just before I expected sudden death? Well, I'll be honest; one thing only stood out, even after all I had learned. What of Josey Mears?

"What of Josey Mears?" The guttural voice rang close to my ears. Startled, I'll admit it. This beast had put into words the very thought that went through my head. "Ah, you feel that, eh?" And he was master of the situation now, voice well under control, the low, gruff monotone only.

"You fooled us for awhile, Stacey Lee—just awhile—and our agent that you threw out. But you want to marry Josey Mears, eh? Good. Happiness and a long life for a single name, just a single name."

"But Josey's married." I liked to hear his voice, watch the action of his swinging arms and great hands.

"Who spoke of marriage?" The head came nearer, just above me now, and his voice rumbled down inside of him some place. "I control every movement of this girl. I have but to raise my hand, speak the words

and she is yours; a pretty slip of a thing, marriage is a nuisance, and a girl like—"

Enough! I had heard enough. One supreme effort, I shot to my feet, swift and straight my body bounded from that chair. I couldn't use my hands or my feet, but I could use my head. And I did; flush on the jaw I caught him, shooting his body straight up, stifling the curse on his lips as his teeth clicked together with the sharp sound of a hammer upon steel.

I paid, too, the throbbing in my head started all over again. I saw the other two rush forward as the leader staggered backward, grasped at a chair, nearly sunk to the floor, recovered his balance and spat blood from beneath his hood. One hand rubbed at his head, the other shot beneath his hood and stroked his mouth.

The others never reached me. I had slipped back into the chair as the hooded man raised his hand and stopped the two figures. He didn't speak. He just strode forward, stood above me a moment, raised his hand, closed a huge fist and swung. I took the blow just behind the ear, was knocked clean off the chair and struck with my head upon the floor. Once again came blackness.

This time I knew from whence the blow had come and, too, yes, I think that I knew something else. But overshadowing it all came the falling blackness, the blackness of oblivion.

CHAPTER XXIX

JUST JOSEY MEARS

THIS time when I opened my eyes I was alone in the room, no bright light to hurt my vision, just the dull glare of a candle not exactly soothing, but on the whole I felt better than at my first awakening. This getting cracked was becoming a habit, and I had a burning desire to live.

I strained once at my bonds as I lay flat upon the hard boards. No strength for that yet. So I just thought things out. No bullet had struck me that first time; some one had hit me on the back of the head and—

I wasn't even left lying there in peace. The door had opened, creakingly, warningly. I didn't swing around and look at it. I faced heavy curtains, before a closet. Feet were crossing the floor, light, hesitating, anxious feet; they paused now, the light of the candle darkened, the figure had stopped before the candle.

I swung my head slowly and painfully around, scraping it upon the floor; looked up and despite my feebleness of body, the aching bones, the lassitude of

ambition, I came to a sitting position, my bound feet stretched straight out before me.

Josey Mears stood before the candle. Yes, the girl whom I was going to save, not only from the clutches of the Black Circle, but from herself. A pretty hero I looked now, trussed up like a pig, with about as much intelligence as one, and maybe I'm not overflattering to that poor, abused animal at that.

I looked long and steadily at her. What a change, what a frightened, haunted look in her eyes! All of Mrs. Clayburn's sadness of expression was there; not the lines, so deep perhaps, but they were forming fast, the grip of the deadly thing was marking her. All the loathing that I should have felt was missing. My heart just went out to her again.

Foolish, but then, isn't all love a foolish thing? Yes, I loved her. She stood there watching me, twisting at her fingers, a soft, pained sort of look in her eyes. But she didn't speak, the quivering lips wouldn't form the words, I guess.

"Josey." Very low, involuntarily, but she heard me. Her dulled expression seemed to clear, her eyes take on a more alive look and then the spell that held her was broken.

"Stacey—oh, Stacey." With an inarticulate little cry she ran across the room, knelt there by my side, and her arms were around me, her soft, young skin was against mine as she held me, as a mother does a child, I guess. Her bosom was heaving up and

down, the sobs that she tried to control came, anyway, her lashes brushed my cheeks and they were wet.

"Stacey, my Stacey," she kept repeating over and over. And somehow it was hard for me. I didn't have the same faith in myself, the same assurance that I'd face the end with a smile. I wanted to live, not die. Was this little face so close to mine? That soft, luxurious skin, the frightened, loving words that she purred into my ears, just the acting of a creature of the under-world. I didn't believe it. And I didn't care. I wanted her, always, and—what was she doing there now?

"Oh, Stacey, why didn't you tell me before about yourself—this White Circle—that you were of them. Oh, Stacey." Her voice broke again, burning tears dropped upon my cheeks.

Why didn't I tell her? Why hadn't she told me? But I didn't put my thoughts into words. Her whole attitude was not one of hope, one that led me to believe that she was there to help me, save me. Then she recovered quickly, held my head the closer, whispered her words softly, imploringly into my ears:

"Who is this White Circle, Stacey? What is he to you? Come, let me know the name, his name, you can save yourself yet—save yourself for me."

She was watching me closely, begging me to betray a trust.

"You are a member—a worker for this man who is

called the Black Circle?" I couldn't help but put the question, though I knew the answer.

"I am here to help you; for only that purpose." Great, honest brown eyes looked through tear-dimmed lids down at me. Had she lied? Was she there simply to seek information from me, carry her message back to the Black Circle—the name of the White Circle? A clever game, that; they wouldn't allow her with me for any other purpose. She must have read the horror in my face as I looked up at her.

"Have you ever seen this—leader—this Black Circle?" I questioned impulsively. "To-night—"

"Ah," I heard her gasp. "He is here then—no, I have never seen him, but few know him." Her surprised seemed real enough. Then, in a burst of words that it was hard to follow:

"You must tell me this name. That is the price of your freedom. You know—why not tell and—"

"Betray my trust!"—Silly that. I couldn't if I wanted to. But the catch in my voice warned her.

"Tell me then, Stacey, just tell me, I shall get a message to him, warn him of your plight." Her voice raised to an eager pitch as she went on. Did she read hope in my eyes? Is that what she thought she saw in the sudden widening of my pupils, the contracting of my forehead, the tightening of my lips? For a while I didn't hear what she was saying.

She was a member of this gang—forced in, blindly in or willingly in, it made no difference. I was struck

with sudden distrust of the little hand that smoothed back my hair, stroked my forehead, caressed the lump that tingled down the back of my skull.

Why my sudden change, the revolting feeling for the nearness of this woman? I had looked over her shoulder, looked straight upon those slightly waving curtains and plainly I saw a black hood, the slitlike eyes. An instant only, no more. This girl that I loved was playing with me, coaxing me to speak, pleading with me to betray a man to those listening ears beyond the curtain. Her words came again, now through the dull roaring in my ears:

"Listen, Stacey." All eagerness, she seemed. "I won't let them know, just tell me the name, I'll get help; you must fight for awhile, plead for time, let them think you'll finally tell, in the meantime I'll inform the White Circle." Her lips pressed to mine for a moment. Then, softly, as she clung to me: "Tell me, Stacey."

The words that I would have spoken would not come. I didn't even look up at her, look toward the curtain again, I simply told her the truth. After all, death didn't seem so terrible.

"I don't know who he is." I doubt if she heard. I hardly heard the words myself. Then I repeated them, louder; what did I care if the listening figure heard? That was best, it would end things more quickly. "I don't know who he is."

"So—that's it. I half suspected." She nodded as

she slipped slightly away from me. "Stacey, you don't seem to trust me." I could have laughed at the reproach in her voice.

"How can I trust you, Josey? And what of it now?"

"Perhaps it is the end." Her eyes filled again. "Think, though. To-night, in the grounds at Townsend's, some one would have shot you had I not interfered; and the other night, at Crestwood—oh, I didn't know then who you were—but I saved you. That boy who was killed, I made him call to you through the secret entrance. I'm not all bad, Stacey, I have a trust, like you have and I love you."

Did I grab at a hope?

"At Crestwood—and you didn't know it was I—that was before—you—I—we knew that—"

"That we loved each other, yes," She filled in the words. "Neither one of us understood the other, Stacey; looked through the fog far enough to see the clearness of the sky. I thought you a drifter. Tried to save you. Send you away from an attempted blackmail plot in which I—oh, I had a part. And—"

"Josey! How deep are you in with these—people?"

"No time for that." She tried to smile—a weak attempt. "I'll throw aside all hope of—just all hope. Beg for time, plead, make them believe anything. Stacey, the police will be here in an hour—I—"

"Great God, Josey!" I fairly shrieked the words. What had happened to my head? Why had I let her

talk like that? My hopes had raised, my heart beat the quicker, danger was forgotten, and that hooded figure, those listening ears, but too late. The two blows had dulled my brain. Instead of Josey trapping me, I had trapped her and—

It was over in an instant. The curtains had parted, a huge figure strode across the room. Josey flung herself upon me, her arms wound around my neck, her lips pressed once to mine and—did a tiny hand push something beneath me? Yes. Surely. I slid back, a wave of hope came, a heavy object was beneath me, a revolver! That was it.

In passionate, uncontrolled rage I cursed the man who dragged the girl to her feet. One hand clutched her delicate throat, the other twisted itself in her hair.

"So, my pretty." The Black Circle was talking as he held the struggling girl partly clear of the floor. "I half suspected this—only half, though. Few ever betray my trust—none—and live. You would go to the police; you would notify the White Circle; you would—" He shook the girl.

I could see her face changing color, hear her gasp for air. Bound and helpless I sat there and cursed him. A foolish, hopeless thing, certainly, but I knew not what I did.

The two others rushed into the room at the sound of my infuriated voice. The girl, a wilted, helpless thing, was turned over to them, half carried, half dragged from the room. My eyes followed them. Was

she dead? No. For just before they passed out the door her eyes opened; great, brown, frightened eyes, that looked at me. Reproachfully? No, I think not. Hopefully? Hardly that either.

Hopelessly, I guess is the word. And yet they fell from my face to my body. Even then, when she was in the shadow of death, she tried to give me a message, the message that a gun had been slipped beneath me just before the hooded demon had made his final dash into the room.

CHAPTER XXX

"I KNOW WHO YOU ARE!"

THE door slammed shut, leaving the Black Circle alone with me. He laughed shrilly, drew up a chair and sat down facing me, watching me through the slits.

"You don't know who the White Circle is," he said slowly, and his voice had somewhat of a ring of naturalness to it, a familiar ring, too. "She believes you and so do I. No subterfuges now. You are going to die, Stacey Lee, just pass out in this lonely house. You see—" I guess he was in the mood to make me suffer—"it was a rather clever thing—your meeting Townsend—a plant that—we were thinking of having you shot. Josey interfered with that.

"But after all, you'll get your wish—marry Josey—for you'll meet her in a few days—no more. A little information I must have from her, that is all. I think she will talk. Women generally do when I wish. Think that over when—the fires—begin to sweep around you."

"The fires of hell await you, too," was the best answer I could give him. Remorse, it gripped and hurt inside of me like a living thing.

"Fires of hell. No, I did not say that. Simply fires." He rose now, quietly pushed the chair back toward the wall and walked to the door, swung it open and stood so a moment, framed in the doorway. His right hand brushed the dark hood over his forehead, his left stroked at his chin. And I sat bolt upright. I knew beyond a doubt who the Black Circle was!

"Ah—" I could not keep the words back— "I know who you are at last!"

His hand shot behind him and he closed the door with a bang.

"'At last' is correct," he said, and his voice was very low—"It is too bad that you will not be given the opportunity to see just how quick I am with a gun."

"Too bad, certainly." I echoed his words in a far-away voice. Above everything then, I wanted to face him and see just how quick he was with a gun. "But I know who you are!" I almost shrieked the words.

His step was light and quick as he crossed the room, pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and thrust it between my teeth, strapping it deftly by winding another about my chin and neck.

A huge arm jerked forward, a great hand clutched at my collar and I was lifted clear of the floor, thumped down further back against the wall. He leaned down and picked the gun from the floor, juggled it in his hand a moment before he spoke.

"Those who make mistakes pay the price of failure. The Black Circle does not make any." A tap on the

door interrupted him. He turned, called "Come in" and waited.

"The car's ready. She's in it with Cal." The speaker was the silent gent of the three at the table, and the one I had ducked in the lake.

"Good," the leader returned, and stepping across the room, laid a hand upon his shoulder. "The girl will die, of course, Bert—and him." He jerked a thumb over his shoulder toward me. "Horrible, Bert—it makes my heart bleed." His voice was very low. "Just an example, you understand, not a warning. Your boat sails at noon; you have your passage ready, bags packed; it is a delicate matter."

"Great God! You don't think I've talked." The man called Bert turned a deadly white. "That ain't why you send me, is it?"

"No, no." Again the hand across his head, the other along his chin. "You have been indiscreet, Bert, mixing in the wrong society, and I have seen you at several affairs—places that are not for your kind—not for the trusted and highly paid officers of a great business—a well established organization. To-morrow, you sail, Bert—if you come back, come a better and more thoughtful man.

"You have been very close and dear to me in this business, but, socially"—and now the voice rang with hidden meaning—"you have been too close—those whom I know here are never to see me, speak to me, even hear of me, in that other world. But it is of small

moment. Go—out the back—through the woods, take the Broadway car to the subway. I do not travel with you to-night."

The man in the doorway turned from a sickly white to a pasty yellow as his eyes dropped from the black hood to the little gun which swung loosely in the large hand. Then, without a word, he swung quickly about —and was gone.

For a moment the Black Circle stood by the door, then he turned and paced up and down the room, never once did he look at me, but twice he consulted his watch. With a toss of those great shoulders he reached some decision, and still ignoring my presence, stepped out the door, closed it behind him, and I heard his heavy feet as he tramped down the stairs.

A period of long silence after that, then the thud of a closing door, followed by the purr of a high-powered motor—a single, faint sound of slipping gears—and nothing.

Frantically I struggled against the bonds. Useless —they simply dug the deeper into my already torn wrists—a good job, that—the rope was strong and thick and cut like wire. I had hope—the door had not been locked, the key was on the inside, but try as I might I could not get to my feet. And how was I to die? Alone there in the empty house—and—

No—not alone—running feet were coming up the stairs—feet that made no attempt to hide their rapid beat. The door swung open—the man called Bert

dashed into the room—his eyes were staring and eager, slightly relieved as he looked at me. Then, jerking the gag from my mouth:

"He didn't kill you before he left." The words just burst from him. "I hoped, but they'll be back any minute. Did I hear you say that you had recognized the Black Circle?" No question—just a statement.

"You did." I looked up at him.

"Listen." His voice rang with eagerness. "You tell me who he is and I'll cut these ropes and let you go. Blackmail—" His lips snapped. "There would be real blackmail, indeed."

That was interesting—hopeful, too—and I nodded. For the moment I had thought that this Bert was sent back to kill me—but why the conversation about his trip abroad? Surely, not for my benefit—there was no longer any doubt about me. I was marked for death—made doubly sure by the shout that I had recognized the Black Circle.

One thing stood out—this man wanted information from me, then what? Would he let me go? Not a chance. His secret about the Black Circle would become useless if another knew—if I knew, and lived.

"Untie me—first—cut the ropes." I tried for freedom, anyway.

But he shook his head as he produced a knife.

"Look—just a snap and you are free, but not until you tell—hurry—some one will come back any minute

—maybe they intend to kill you, you know—without my help you haven't a chance. Tell me his name!"

Half a plan was forming.

"You have a revolver," I told him. "I have nothing —at least, cut the rope that binds my legs, show your good faith that far."

He hesitated a second only, then snapped the knife forward, hacked a moment, and my legs were free. Twice I tried to rise—and twice I fell back again, then I came to my feet, slipped along the wall toward the door, Bert watching me like a hawk, his revolver following my every movement. It was a desperate plan, and yet it might work—might—how I prayed that it would!

My fingers were free, I wiggled them back and forth, waiting for that supreme moment. And then I took my chance, close to the mantel, almost at the door, and the words of warning trembled on the man's lips.

Something helped me then—a sudden crash, like the snapping of wood from below—something that made Bert throw his head up, listen and sniff at the air, like some animal. It was then that I blew out the candle, jumped before the door and, clutching the key with my fingers, spun it in the lock. It was a huge, specially designed key—not a common door one—the key clicked home, came out in my nervous fingers as I dropped to the floor. I heard the man dash toward me, bring up sharp against the great oaken door.

Good! So far it had worked. Fool! He thought

I was going to try and run for it, flee in the dark, with my hands bound, and a man after me, with a gun and a flash light, too, no doubt. It was the flash that I feared—I must act before that came out. I found the crack I had carefully studied before I acted, threw myself across the room, was by the window when his flash split the darkness.

"What the hell's all this?" His voice was puzzled as well as angry. "You're on the third story, the window's barred, no way out but the door. Damn your hide, you're gone crazy!" He lit the candle again, pocketed the light and glared at me, moving toward me, his gun trained upon my head. "I've a good mind to push you over. What's his name now? Quick!"

"I'll tell you when you let me go—not a moment—"

"You'll tell me now." His hand crept nearer. The gun was close to my head—murder blazed in his eyes—this man was a killer—I'd marked him wrong on our first meeting—at least, he would kill now.

But his finger never closed upon the trigger. His mind was taken off the gun as quickly as mine. Unmistakably came the odor of burning wood—and almost on top of that a tiny stream of smoke crept from beneath the door.

"They've set the house on fire," Bert gasped—forgot me entirely and turned toward the door, missed the key, tore desperately at the knob and, turning, faced me. He never could shake that oaken barrier down, nor force the lock either, not in the time given him—

the time between life and death. I understood fully then what the Black Circle had meant when he spoke of "Fire."

"What—where's that key? You've got it!" He fairly sprang across the room upon me, shaking me by the throat, hurling me to my knees.

"Easy does it, Bert," I said quietly, though my heart was racing—racing with a newborn hope. "Untie my hands—make a deal with me, and I'll open the door."

CHAPTER XXXI

TONGUES OF FIRE!

SMOKE was seeping through cracks in the floor now —great gusts of it at times—it worried me somewhat. The fire downstairs must have had considerable headway. Soaked with oil, I guess. I tried to reason with the thoroughly frightened man.

He held me against the wall, his pistol jammed tight up under my chin while he frantically searched me. If I had the key hidden about me I doubt if he could have found it. His fingers were all thumbs. Another try at the door, his body pressed against it, hurled time and time against the heavy oak. But it didn't give an inch—staunch, strong wood—great, reliable, steel lock.

It was then—a miserable, whining, frightened creature—that he saw light. No guts had Bert. From threats he had gone to pleading, begging me to tell him where the key was.

I tried to speak calmly.

"Cut the rope." But he still hesitated. And time was precious. "Think." It was I who talked now, and he who listened. "I'll tell you the name of the Black Circle now—" I leaned over and whispered in his ear. He came erect almost at once.

"No—no—it can't—" Then after a moment: "By God, you're right!" A knife came out, slit the rope, and my hands were free, but Bert still held that gun, the fire still raged below. I would not disclose the whereabouts of the key, and he would not give me the gun. As well die by fire as lead, was my thought—what his idea was, I didn't know.

Smoke curled up in great volumes, just rolled under the door, through the floor, distinctly, loudly, and fearfully came the crackling of wood from beneath. I rubbed my bloodless hands together, turned once to the window, jerked back the shade, looked between the iron bars. A great burst of flame shot up, enveloped the whole window, illuminated the room with its deadly brilliancy. At that moment Bert and I struck an agreement.

He emptied the gun—I took the bullets and he kept the now useless revolver. Only a moment after that, just time for me to make sure that he had no other weapon—time to dash the knife hurling through the glass between the bars. Then I knelt upon the floor, slid my fingers into the crack and felt for the key. But I could not get it out. With a sigh I thought of the sharp blade of the knife that I had hurled through the glass. The whole house seemed to be groaning, then a single spurt of flame slipped up through the floor.

The look I cast up at the gunman told him the truth. I didn't have to speak—he didn't have to question me.

He was on the floor beside me, slipping his fingers into the crack. As if by magic the key came out. My fingers were numb, I guess—even now they were tingling with the blood of returning circulation. Together we reached that heavy door, and again delay, for this time it was his fingers that refused to act—at least, his hand trembled so that he could not get the key into the lock.

I stretched out a hand, grabbed the key, and thrust it straight home. My hand did not tremble now—there was a steadiness, an assurance, a new-born confidence—I was going out—out to Josey Mears—no matter where she was, instinct told me that I would find her. And—my jaw set tightly. I was going to look into that one-hundred-thousand-dollar face—see, too, how quickly he could draw a gun.

The door was jerked open by four eager hands. The two of us dashed forward, hesitated, and were forced back into the room—in an instant that room was filled with smoke, thick, choking, black smoke that got down deep into my chest, lungs, every part of my body, it seemed. We closed the door again, looked at each other—each accusing, I suppose—each with the thought that the other had waited too long.

It would be impossible to seek exit below. The lower part of the house was a raging furnace that roared up at us like the hidden interior of an active volcano.

"Take off your coat," I told him. "Sling it about

your head—you know the house—is there a way down the back?—but lead, you must—I'd be lost out there."

He nodded, his head wagging grotesquely through the haze—just a head, nothing more—the thick, seeping, clutching, stifling vapor pierced through the nostrils and into the base of the brain.

Coats over our heads—both at the door—Bert nearest the exit, we flung it open again. A burst of smoke again—a white, drifting wave that vanished almost at once—fire, just a raging fire—lay without, leaping from below—above the dark banister that guarded the stairs.

No chance that way, but perhaps the back—we got out into the hall all right, along the narrow passage-way, blindly staggering on, occasionally our way suddenly illuminated as by a hundred lamps.

The back stairs—we reached them, scorched slightly, perhaps, but safely enough. No hope there, not even a chance to shut again the door which led down them. It blazed up almost in our faces. The heat was intense, nothing could describe its overpowering, dragging down effect. It was like a living thing that gripped at my ankles, clutched at my knees, made me lift my feet in a queer running movement, and yet seemed to drag them back to the floor again—like a magnet.

Heavier and heavier my feet grew—deeper and deeper came my breathing; and the deeper I breathed the more I coughed, choked, but I staggered on after

the form of the man ahead. Crouched now, swinging from side to side, he plodded back along the passageway, down another one, a turn again toward the back of the house, I think.

"A window!" I kept shouting at him, but he did not hear. I don't know why I cried that, no reason, just that I wanted air—air that was it. I kept repeating it over and over to myself. Once my dinner jacket caught fire. Mechanically I beat it out with my hand. Was the smoke getting thicker—or was my vision getting dimmer? The figure ahead seemed a blurred, indistinct mass now, yet when I reached forth a hand I touched his back.

My head was dizzy, and the fall of my feet grew uncertain—they had been heavy, now they became so light that I was not sure I moved at all, no feel as I put one down and raised the other, like gliding on air—such air—fingers of smoke were clutching at my throat, slowly but surely filling my lungs with deadly gasses.

A crash some place in the house—a seething roar—a burst of flame that shot up behind. In the light I saw a ladder just ahead—the man called Bert was already on it, climbing, going up. I gripped a rung, crawled up, then—the sky—a trap had opened above—fading stars, distinct blue of the sky—a tiny strip of pink, too. Was this the dawn?

The air! That was it. Great drafts of it filled my lungs. I opened my mouth wide, breathed deep, and tumbled from the ladder—a great weight had crashed

on me from above. My first thought was of treachery, realized that arms were about my neck, and struck out blindly. Then I knew the truth. The final effort—the first breath of pure air had strangely knocked the stamina out of Bert—he lay at my feet, helpless, unconscious.

I clutched for the ladder, climbed halfway up it, breathed of the air again and returned. Something pulled me back—I couldn't wish that kind of a death for any one, unless it was for—but, no, I don't think then that I wished it even for the Black Circle himself. As for the helpless man—we had made a compact to seek liberty together.

I forgot that it was he who had helped drag Josey from the room—forgot all but that a man lay below—on the brink of that terrible, roaring fire.

I felt stronger with the pure night, or rather, morning air in my lungs. Still, it was no easy job dragging him up that ladder. Once I thought that he opened his eyes, then I became assured that he had recovered, for a hand stretched out and gripped at the ladder when I nearly lost my footing. The flames had reached us!

"Do your own climbing now, my man," I told him as I half dragged him onto the roof and shut the trap. The flames were slipping through the great slanting roof in several places.

"Now what?" I asked, looking around me, at the deep, slanting roof far above the trees, and the re-

flection of the fire in the sky—yes, even directly above us.

"A tree—we've got to climb down to it—its branches touch the very edge of the roof. There." He pointed down.

God! I looked over! What a slide! There was the tree right below us—its heavy branches against the old rusted gutters—strong enough to hold a man, surely. Two? Perhaps!

Was it the roar of the fire, the great thud of falling timber some place within that house—or simply an instinctive warning of danger? I don't know. However, I turned my head, looked up over my shoulder. A glare of light, a stretch of flame that seemed to shoot straight up into the clouds—and I took in the picture behind me.

Bert, the gunman, the blackmailer I had saved, knelt upon the flat surface of the trap. One hand held to the edge, the other was raised far above his head, there was a gleam of hatred in his eyes, specks of blood upon his lips, like the eyes of a cat his gleamed at me through the sooty blackness of his face.

I couldn't slip back, the sloping surface of the roof lay behind me, only one chance as the gun struck, flashing straight down toward my head. I dived forward, the butt missed my head and neck, crashed upon my back, and my hands were wound around his neck. A terrible moment then—the fire was forgotten—just a deadly struggle between two desperate men.

How we came to our feet I did not know, but we were standing, clutching madly at each other, striking vicious blows with one hand while we held on tightly with the other. Not a foot of space to move about on —a backward step meant death—a forward one, too, if the falling man kept his grip.

Above us the gathering dawn in the sky—below, that constant roar, crash, clouds of smoke, bursts of flame. It shot through all parts of the roof now, making the black face before me more hideous in the sudden flashes.

Then a peal as of thunder, more deadening, a sound that made the preceding ones insignificant in comparison. The trap groaned, the fire shot up, scorching our legs, and the entire building trembled.

I think our arms dropped together, we just stood facing each other—and the trap gave—I felt myself falling, stuck out a foot, rested it on something hard—something that was crumpling beneath me—and threw myself out and away from the hole, with its shooting, clutching hands of flame. Just a face—a terrible, agonized face before me for the moment that I hung balanced upon the edge, where the sides of the slanting roof met.

One single cry, a shriek, and silence. Bert had dropped into the furnace, swallowed completely. I slid slowly backward, hesitated, hung so a moment, then with ever-gathering speed, shot down the side of the roof, flying rapidly through great shoots of flame.

A clutch, a grip, a torn hand, a broken nail, and I was in the branches of a tree, breaking through them, falling, a reach, a grasp, and I held. One terrific roar —no house at all now, just a fiery furnace.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE CAT'S OUT

Above the din of falling lumber and crackling flames came the sound of bells, the weird, uncanny shrieks of a siren. I knew what that meant—the engines were coming. It wouldn't do to be discovered there. Slowly —painfully I slid from branch to branch—somehow reached the ground, heard voices, the calling of men, the hiss of the chemical, and I was gone, staggering through the trees, over a fence, and down a wooded hill.

No path—stony, uneven ground—stumps too, trip me, but in the way of a guide and also a cause of danger, the gathering light. I reached Broadway before I rested, sat there near the curb, a sorry object. My white dress shirt was black and torn, my trousers ripped and burned, and my hands and face—well, I might pass for a coal heaver returning from work, but never one going to work. I tried my pocket. Good—my money was there.

I might hail a passing car, though I saw none at that moment, besides, there would be suspicions, and later, when the dead body was discovered in the fire, others

would recollect the dilapidated and blackened figure who sought a ride.

As for Oscar, I dare not try and get in touch with him—yet, one thing was certain—a dead man would be found in that house, and the Black Circle would be sure it was I. Good! I wanted him to think me dead. Bert couldn't be identified. Such an idea was impossible—besides, he was supposed to sail for Europe.

Would they watch to see if he actually took the boat? And if they didn't see him—that wouldn't mean anything. He had showed abject terror of the Black Circle's accusing eyes, the threatening manner behind his softly spoken words. Yes, they would readily believe that he had fled.

A truck passed, loaded with workmen from Yonkers —foreigners, all of them. I took a chance, dashed out on the road, and swung aboard as the good-natured driver half stopped. A plan was forming. Suspicious eyes glared at me from out these swarthy faces of Italy's sons.

They did not question me—were silent as far as I was concerned, but they whispered among themselves. My smile, my attempted indifference to their scrutiny, didn't register well. Just before we reached the subway my plans were formed. I nodded, waved a hand in thanks and, dropped from the truck. I was glad to see it continue on its way beneath the heavy Elevated pillars.

The sun was up—a great, dazzling ball of red. I felt

for my watch—was surprised to find that I still had it. It was exactly six o'clock. For the first time I felt the chill of the spring morning, but there was nothing to do for that. I was alive—fairly well, so to speak. A whistling youth dropped from a Broadway car, approached a cigar store, slipped a key into the lock, and entered.

Cautiously I walked to the door and peered in, the door was open, held so by a bit of stone. The clerk busied himself behind the counter, his back to the door. I stepped in, quietly crossed before the counter, around the side, and slipped into a telephone booth in the rear. I saw the man raise his head as I closed the door, but my unsavory and suspicious appearance was not noticeable through the musty glass.

A long wait, a sleepy voice, and I gasped with relief. Mrs. Clayburn herself had answered my call. It was of the Clayburns I thought first when I needed aid. She didn't let me explain, didn't want any reasons from me. A remarkable woman, who recognized in the low tones of my voice the dire straits I was in.

"Stacey Lee." Her voice came softly over the wire. "Just tell me what you want me to do—no matter what it is I'll do it." A friend—I hadn't guessed wrong about that little woman.

"I'm at the end of the subway line—Two Hundred and Forty-Second Street and Broadway," I told her. "I'll walk through Van Cortland Park—over to the golf links—you know the boathouse by the lake?"

"Very well," she answered.

"Good. Get your husband to drive up there—at once, if possible—I can't talk here much longer—you'll understand when you see me, but I need help—and quickly. Have him bring an overcoat."

"Don't worry." There was confidence in her voice. "I'll come myself."

I didn't get a chance to speak again—tell her not to. Of a certainty I didn't wish to cause any more trouble in that family. Besides, I might be watched. Still, that seemed far-fetched.

The clerk eyed me this time as I stepped from the booth—kept my head well turned and sauntered out the door. But he didn't follow—once, halfway across the street, I looked back. He was still standing by the counter—his eyes on me—and then he turned again to his work. I guess in his day he had seen some queer people—strange things.

I felt safer as I stepped out on the soft green of the park, made my way quickly across to the Putnam Railroad tracks, around the corner of the lake, out by the boathouse. Not a soul did I meet and I was only a distant outline to those few who passed upon Broadway—mostly in the trolleys, or in trucks.

In the shadow of the boathouse I sat upon the dew-covered grass. I was hungry, thirsty, but above all I wanted a smoke. I spent the time in thinking over the past events. The things that led up to my discovery

of the identity of the Black Circle. Now what would his next move be?

Where would he take Josey Mears? A problem, that. But I thought that I knew the answer to it. And I dreamed on—dreamed of the moment when I would look straight into that one-hundred-thousand-dollar face—see the quickness of that trigger finger, and make my peace with Josey Mears.

I half sat up. After all, how did the Black Circle know I was in the house of death when his lieutenant was killed? Had Josey told him? Who else? Yet, after what I had heard—after what Josey had told me—what she had offered to do for me, I could not believe that.

I'd collect that one hundred thousand dollars and take Josey away—across the sea some place. The Mediterranean—the great snow-covered peaks of Switzerland—the languid quiet of that hillside city of— Exhausted, I stretched out on the ground and slept.

I came to slowly. Some one was bending over me—a slip of a woman—a girl—I stretched out my arms, only partly awake.

"Josey," I murmured.

"My poor boy!" The voice brought me quickly up. It was Mrs. Clayburn who knelt on the grass beside me. "I've been looking for you for nearly ten minutes. You needn't fear that you've been recognized. Twice I passed, looked at you, and did not know you. Come,

the car is here, and people are stirring about. It's nearly seven o'clock."

I was stiff now as, without a word, I followed her to the car, put on the long automobile coat, and pulled the gray cap well down over my face. Then I slumped into the seat beside her. For the first time I realized that I was all in—knocked clean—as weak as a baby. I tried to tell myself different—make an effort to sit erect—bring vividly before my mind the work that I contemplated that night.

For I knew that Josey still lived—instinct told me that—reason, too. For the Black Circle had said that Josey and I would not meet for a couple of days. He would let her linger for awhile. I knew who the Black Circle was, but who was Josey Mears—where did she fit—and who was the White Circle?

The servants were all in the back of the house when Mrs. Clayburn hustled me through the front door, up the stairs and into her little sitting room. Frank Clayburn was pacing up and down.

"She wouldn't let me go with her," he said. "Man, I'm glad you're safe." His hand wrung mine, water was brought, I washed and—then coffee and toast was all I could swallow—somehow my hunger had gone. But I could smoke—never before had I so appreciated the soothing effect of a cigarette.

They were wonderful people—the Clayburns—happy now in their new found love—and they never questioned me. Waited on me hand and foot, made up a

luxurious bath. But I wouldn't go to bed. I waited while Mrs. Clayburn carried a note to Oscar and returned with my clothes, then I dressed, stretched off on the couch and threw my bomb.

"I know who the Black Circle is, but I won't mention the name until I'm positive." Then I told them somewhat of the events of that night. Not too much of Josey—just that she was in the blackmailer's hands and I would have to reach her.

"I'll tell you what." Frank Clayburn leaned over to me. "I'm rather thick with the district attorney—a great friend of my father's. Why not go straight to him with the whole story?"

"No." I shook my head. He could do that if he wanted to after I was through and Josey was safe. "You can't punish blackmailers. Too hard to get evidence against them."

"But this has gone to murder," he objected. "Gladys is willing to come out with her story—that will protect you—in that shooting, you know."

"It won't do." I still shook my head. "I can't prove my case—yet—besides, I'm still working for the White Circle—I must give him the first information. But, above all, we must trap this leader." Then, banging my knee: "I will do that to-night."

"But the White Circle is dead," Gladys chimed in.

"And you're in no condition to go out to-night." Her husband had that to say.

"The White Circle lives—and I go to-night. You

two should understand now." I tried to smile. "You see, I love Josey Mears."

They both nodded, though they could not fully understand that the police would be out of the question until Josey was free. Even yet I didn't know how deeply she was in it. And this husband business—what grounds were there for that belief—or were there any?

I slept till six o'clock. Earlier the Clayburns were insistent that they go with me that night—at least, drive me to my destination, but now they were strangely silent on the subject—nodded in satisfaction as I ate a big meal—and let me out the door without a murmur when darkness came.

Dangerous to go to my house? Yes, there wasn't a doubt of that. But I had to go—somehow I had to get in touch with the White Circle—at least, leave a message for him. On the way I stepped into a drug store and called the Townsend residence on the phone. He was not home—would not be home until late that evening.

To further questioning I received the astounding information that he had been home the previous night—no, he hadn't gone out at all, there had been a dinner party. Yes, he had had breakfast at his usual hour. Now, that was system for you—real system. And the cat's out, if you haven't guessed it.

To my way of thinking *Robert T. Townsend* and the Black Circle were one. How did I figure it? Well,

it came to me when he pulled that little trick with his hands—his right brushing his forehead—his left slipping over his chin. His size meant nothing—he just bent his body forward, sunk sort of into himself. But the facts preceding my discovery were the damning evidence.

Get this—it's conclusive. Some one had called me on the phone, pretending to be the White Circle—I knew that now—it was Townsend—he arranged the meeting, arranged for a man to shoot me down—at least, wound me. Failing in that through the intervention of Josey he played on my imagination—made me believe that by going to the old house I would find the Black Circle.

Every action, reviewed, pointed to him. Then, in the house, I think his idea was to strike me down as I came through the window. That failed as I came through gun first.

But above all stood out the blow in the dark, the blow on the head. No one could have struck that but the man in the room with me. I hadn't thought of it at first, because—oh, Townsend seemed so impossible in any rôle but that of a bore. Now—I clenched my fists, mounted my own door step and faced Oscar.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE CLOAK-ROOM CHECK

He couldn't hold back his emotions this time. His arms just started out, rested on my shoulders, held me so a moment and I saw the water in his eyes. I was sure worrying poor, faithful, practical Oscar lately.

"It's all right, old boy." I clapped him on the shoulder. He seemed suddenly so ashamed of his emotions. I turned and picked up the evening paper, flipped a page and saw staring me in the face the glaring type that announced the fire in Riverdale.

It was good reading. Brought a feeling of safety in it, too. The cause was given in the simple explanation that some tramp had sought shelter in the house, and must have thrown a cigar or a lighted match into some paper before he fell asleep. His body was found, just a charred heap of blackened bones. The reading of that paper would bring considerable satisfaction to Robert T. Townsend. In these remains he would recognize me. Good. I was going to Crestwood to-night.

No telephone calls, not a word from the White Circle, and I would be needing him to-night. Under other circumstances I could wait, but not with Josey Mears in such danger. Twice I sat down and penned a mes-

sage to him, and each time before I fairly got started I paused. I couldn't trust such a message to paper. It was Oscar who saw me tearing up sheet after sheet and burning them in the fireplace.

"If you have a message to send," he said, "let me take it. I can carry it by word of mouth, and you can trust me."

Yes, I could trust him. But the message would have to go by telephone, in answer to the call of the White Circle. And what if another called, received that message, sent a warning to the Black Circle—Townsend? I shook my head, but time was passing and there was nothing else to do.

"Oscar," I tried hard to impress him with the importance of the trust which I placed in his hands, "you have noticed strange things happening of late. There may be a telephone call from one who—who strangely calls himself the White Circle." It was hard to get that off to Oscar—Oscar, whose life consisted of bank balances, the number of shirts in the wash and the condemnation of faulty tailoring.

There was no change to his face; a placidness that was disconcerting as he echoed my words.

"The White Circle, *monsieur*—very good, *monsieur.*"

"But you must be sure it is the White Circle." And that stumped me for awhile. Then I got it: "Ask the man who calls to repeat the words that were written upon a picture which was sent to me—here—I'll write

them down." And I placed them upon the paper. From memory, of course, that wasn't hard; the words had burned into my mind, running constantly through my head—that same message that was clasped in the thin dead hands of the little old stranger.

What is the death of one for the good of so many? The White Circle, directed by the hand of God, will yet strike.

"And Oscar," I warned him, trying to read something in that calm, unexpressive face, "if he cannot give this, word for word, tell him nothing."

Oscar folded the paper and placed it carefully away inside that sleek black coat.

"And if he can repeat this—this document—what then, *monsieur,* what message do I give him?"

I leaned forward and whispered it in his ear.

"Describe to him the house at Crestwood; the house that you drove to the other night. Tell him I have gone there. Tell him that I have spoken with the Black Circle and that—that the man is Robert T. Townsend."

Was Oscar surprised? I dare say. Excited? I think so. His lips trembled slightly, his hand raised, traveled toward me, hesitated, drew back and fell to his side. I thought that I read what was in his face. He would warn me against the suddenly hazardous life I was leading. He could not be blind to the

dangers I had passed through, unconscious of the intensity with which I placed my trust in his hands.

"Oscar," I said finally, "repeat not a word even if they—some one should attempt to drag the message from you by—oh, torture. And my car—have it ready, get it from the garage now, leave it on the next street, just around the corner."

"I shall drive you to-night, *monsieur?*" And there was real anxiety in his voice.

"No, Oscar." I shook my head. "I drive alone to-night." I set my lips tightly. Oscar would have no place in this night's work. That death lay at the end of my journey, I felt certain. "And Oscar—" I stopped him at the door. "Come back at once. Then don't leave the house. The telephone call may come any minute."

I watched him now, followed him to the door and saw him pass out. Then I turned, dashed up the two flights of stairs to the attic. A trunk there—weapons of all kinds—collected from different parts of the world. I selected a couple of heavy army revolvers, carried them down with me, hunted up oil in the kitchen, and, seating myself by the library table, proceeded to clean them. Oh—they were in good condition—I was just cautious, that was all.

Things were going to break this night; break in a cloud of smoke. If it hadn't been for Josey Mears I'd of looked forward with real pleasure to the work before me. Now—I shrugged my shoulders, threw

open my safe and set upon the table a box of forty-four caliber bullets. That was business, you've got to admit.

The doorbell, suddenly, just a dull, single ring. Oscar! I jumped to my feet. It was not like him to forget his key. And yet— I hurried to the door, threw it open and realized my mistake. A thickset, medium-sized man, with collar turned well up had slipped into the room, shut the door behind him and stood close to me, one hand buried deep in his right coat pocket.

It was in my mind to reach quickly out, grab at that hand, but I didn't. My first idea that this was an emissary of the Black Circle, faded at once. They couldn't know I was alive. No, this man had "police officer" written all over him. No common pounder of the pavements either. His eyes were steady, not simply hard, with attempted domineering, and real intelligence lurked behind them, too. He didn't leave me long in doubt.

"Police Inspector Kiley." His head bobbed up and down, but his eyes remained on me. "Want a word with you, Mr. Lee—in there." His chin shot out toward the lighted room at the end of the hall. Two heavy service revolvers and numerous cartridges lay upon the library table, directly under the light. A pretty display for a police officer.

"Very well, inspector, you wish to talk with me?"

I tried to pass him, toward the darkened front room to the left.

"Back there, where the light is." His eyes opened wider, clear blue orbs, they were. And when I hesitated that hand came out, the gun against my side. There was nothing to do. I shrugged my shoulders, turned and led the way into the room.

"Ah," was all he said as his eyes fell upon the table. He motioned me to a chair and stood before me, his back against the swaying green portières that led to the darkened dining room.

"Now—" I snapped out my watch, consulted it and looked him full in the eyes. "You wish to see me? Please hurry. I'm frightfully busy and," an attempted smile, "as you see, I've been recalling the old army days—memories of the past—cleaning them up for a little practice." Silly conversation? Maybe. But then I couldn't know why he was there, couldn't think what he knew about me.

He smiled in return, and his smile was genuine enough.

"Pretty toys." His great head jerked toward the weapons. "A few questions, Mr. Lee. Where did you spend the night before last?" And he hurled the question, shooting his chin forward, shoving the gun back into his pocket, but keeping his hand upon it.

"Home," I answered without thinking. Here was only one man. I could change anything I said later.

"Before that—earlier in the evening. Oh, come,

I'll help you. What do you know of the murdered man in West Ninety-Seventh Street—the brownstone front, the gray-eyed little money lender—Rollands?" Those blue eyes watched me.

The police had not been sleeping then. I was playing poker again. He read nothing in my face. I was simply wondering if I could get bail that night and reach Crestwood on time, or—yes, if it came to a showdown, I would have to tell the whole story to the police, hope that they would reach the house and save Josey Mears without letting the Black Circle know of the anticipated raid. But I answered Kiley:

"Very little. I met him at several affairs; let me think. By Jove, yes, I met him that very night—no, it was the night before," I stroked my chin, "at the Townsend dance, Robert T. Townsend."

"You were not at his house the night of the murder?"

"I?" Surprised. "Good gracious, no."

"Why didn't you let the police know you had met him—knew him?"

"Man," I smiled more easily now, "Rollands was a money lender. I—" my hands came far apart—"hoped to avoid the notoriety."

So far I felt that I had acted like an honest man. But how did they connect me up with the gray-eyed little man? And then it came out—something that I had entirely forgotten.

"I must warn you that anything further you say

will be used against you," he said very slowly and deliberately. And I knew that this was the forerunner of arrest—the charge of murder, perhaps. "Mr. Lee, your coat was found on the premises, in the closet of the very room in which this Rollands was so brutally murdered."

"Ah!" My exclamation would not be held back. The Black Circle! It wasn't that Josey Mears had told them—they also had seen the name of my tailor on the coat. One count against Josey gone. That coat—the cloak room check I had given the little man at the Townsend dance—and I had entirely forgotten it. I was to pay the price of an overstocked wardrobe. Inspector Kiley must have read what he took to be guilt in my face.

"Mr. Stacey Lee," he said solemnly, "I must charge you with—" A curse, a muffled report, as a bullet dashed through his pocket into the floor. The curtains behind him had fallen forward, torn from their hooks, completely engulfing the man. He struggled now against a wiry, active figure who was rolling him upon the floor, the green portières stifling to a dull, rumbling echo his cry for help.

"Oscar," I gasped as the white face of my servant looked up at me.

"Go—out the back—over the fence—others are in the street—hurry—any moment—" Again the figure struggled, cursed, and again Oscar regained his position upon him. "Go—go—"

Did I do right to leave the faithful Oscar there? But Josey came first. I'd come back and face the music afterward—and some music, too, before I got through with the law. No final escape. Oscar must be protected. One look at my servant, a quick sweep of the bullets into my pocket, another clutch at the guns and I was away, pausing in the hall to lift from the rack my sweater and cap.

The next minute I was out the kitchen window, running rapidly across my tiny yard, over the wooden fence, into the alleyway of the house behind and out onto the street. The car—I found it, slid in, just slipped the gears into low, for the motor was running. A sigh of relief as I went from second to high and sped up the street. I was away. Once Josey was free, nothing else mattered.

CHAPTER XXXIV

I USE MY GUNS

As I sped through the night I put all thought behind and planned for that one strenuous hour—the minute that I sneaked into the house at Crestwood—that supreme moment when I stood face to face with the Black Circle and saw just how quick he was on the draw.

They would not expect me. That was certain. The grounds would probably be guarded, but the night was dark. And what was taking place in that lonely house? I shuddered. Were they torturing a helpless woman? Did they, too, wonder—who was Josey Mears? Did they seek to draw from her agonized lips the full story of her betrayal? Did they suspect that she worked for the White Circle? And was she, after all, the leak in their great organization, the channel through which the White Circle got all his information? Yet she did not know of him—had not known that I was—

Crunch—a bump—the car swerved, nearly lost the road and sped on again. Two great gleaming eyes came on me through the darkness; a shriek of warning or was it fear, as I sped by. I must come on the house from above. I have made it a rule never to act the

same way twice in entering a house, like this—like a thief.

I was there, drove the car from the road, perhaps a quarter of a mile away, shot beneath a dirt bank, jumped from the seat and struck off into the woods. I knew my way. It was the same general direction in which I had escaped before. The wall was there; I peered over it. No moon, no stars. Nothing but thick, gathering clouds, and far distant, I thought, the muffled rumble of thunder, but in the house no lights burned—or did they? Were the shades tightly drawn?

I hopped the wall, crouched low beneath it, listened, not a sound. With one of the pistols that I had loaded in the car clutched tightly in my hand, I snaked over that grass, sensing my way to the secret passage behind the bush that led to the coal cellar.

Nearer and nearer I approached the shadowy outline of the house, pausing, listening as I slipped over the grass. Crawling on hands and knees, wriggling on my stomach, I reached the house, ducked close against the still deeper blackness of the night, and waited again for the guard to pass, waited as I had that other night. Ten minutes must have passed, and no guard came. I grew nervous, restless—five more and not a sound.

With ears strained to catch the tread of feet, I felt about, located my bush, but no hole in the ground, not a sign of a trap, nothing but dirt. Had it been filled in? Was the door buried so I could not locate it? And I dare not show a light. I cursed softly. One

thing was sure—I was going into that house. The absence of a guard bothered me. Perhaps, after all, I was wrong—Townsend was not there, the girl was not there.

I came to my feet, walked around the house, eyes piercing the blackness of the windows for light. Not a strip of it anywhere. And then, when my quest seemed useless, came a shriek, the scream of a woman. Just above me it was. I looked up. Did I catch the faintest gleam of light, just a pin point in the blackness of drawn shades? Maybe. Maybe not. But the scream was real. It came from behind those shades of the large window that faced upon a tiny wooden balcony.

I was through thinking, through pitting brain against brain. From now on let it be brawn against brawn, or lead against lead. I was ready. Josey Mears was in that room. Josey Mears had cried out. Josey Mears needed me and I was coming.

The old vine that clung to the walls of the house gave in my hands. The rusty water pipe that hung down, cut and scratched at my fingers, the great stones helped. Sharp edges gave me a foot-hold. But the climb is not important—that I reached the balcony and threw a foot over was the thing. I didn't fear a shot from beneath. I waited long enough to let a guard walk half a dozen times around the house. I thought, too, that I knew the reason no guard was there.

Certain things the Black Circle kept to himself! I

moved close to the long French windows, heard a slight moan, then a voice, and this time the voice was not disguised. It was Townsend's. A few words came to me, not many, but enough to make my blood run cold, then hot, boiling with a deadly anger.

"How much have you told—and to whom?" A mumble, then: "The White Circle, my dear, or have you spoken with the police? It is well that I never let you know just where this house was—moved you back and forth in a closed car, but the Black Circle never makes a mistake. Let me see those pretty white feet. Ah, we shall have some information from you. I cannot have uncertainty hanging over my head. How much have you told?"

I found the little hole in the shade, pressed my right eye close to the glass and peered into the room, stifling an involuntary gasp. Josey Mears was strapped there in a chair, her face white and drawn, her eyes looking above, her lips set tightly and the fingers of the hands that were tied to her sides bit deeply into her palms.

She was fighting then, fighting against confessing something. She had something to hide from him then, something that she feared she was going to tell. I could see her lips move as if she prayed for strength. But that was not the real horror of the picture.

The wide-eyed man of the previous night knelt upon the floor before an open fire, and in his hand he held a red hot iron. It was this—this that Townsend, wearing only a black mask, turned and took from him; this

iron that in another moment would sear its ugly, flaming pain across those little feet, that were free from shoes or stockings.

And that was that! No bars on the window. I just stepped back, hurled my body against the glass, heard the splitting wood, felt the lock give and, both guns drawn, hands and face cut with flying glass, I crashed into the room.

Quick! Townsend had not lied about that. In one instant he had dropped the poker, drawn, turned and fired. I felt the sting above the knee. One shot only, that was all. I'm no novice at this kind of a game. My right finger clicked home, there was an answering roar. Townsend clutched at the place where his heart should have been, tried to raise his gun in the hand that fell to his side and crumpled to the floor.

As for the wide-eyed man, I turned to him and—the lights went out.

A deadening roar, followed by another and another, a pounding and shouting from somewhere below in the house, the crash of glass, the crunching of wood, the call of men and heavy feet beating upon the stairs.

I lay flat upon my stomach, gun trained on where that door should be. The running feet crossed the hall—many of them—the door burst open, came a flash from a light, a bullet spitting through the darkness, and the light went out. Then another light, a curse, again orange-blue flame.

This light had shone directly on the wide-eyed man,

who crouched in the far corner of the room. And I saw the ever widening hole in his forehead, as the suddenly dimmed and sightless eyes stared out at nothingness.

It was over now. The lights were flashed on and the police were in the room. Four or five of them, plainclothes men from the city crowded in, followed by a uniformed man, whom I took to be from the local department.

I climbed to my feet, searching for an explanation. Then I knew, for in the doorway was framed the yellow figure of Mrs. Clayburn, with her husband close behind her, and then another man, who rapped out orders.

The wide-eyed man was dead. An officer lay sprawled upon the floor and I was frantically struggling with the ropes that held Josey—Josey, who lay back in the chair, in a dead faint. A good-natured Irish detective stepped over, deftly cut the ropes and I held Josey in my arms.

"This will be Mr. Stacey Lee," the man in the doorway was saying, and eyes were studying me.

Came explanations as Gladys Clayburn took Josey from me, rubbed her hands and bathed her face with the water that an officer brought.

"I couldn't help it, Stacey," Gladys told me. "Frank and I saw the district attorney and told him all. We hurried here." She looked up at me, trying to see if

I approved, but I was thinking only of Josey, who was slowly opening her eyes.

The district attorney was speaking.

"If more people would come straight to the police with stories of these blackmailers, there would be less suicides, divorces and newspaper scandals. We're always glad to help, and keep quiet, too. But they don't come. So hundreds of these vultures safely ply their trading in human souls."

"Miss Mears, the girl here," I turned to the speaker. "She—you won't punish her—she's done no wrong—couldn't help—"

"Bless your soul." The man in the doorway laughed. "You're not going to tell me about her. Why, we suspected this gang for some time; couldn't locate the leader, that was all. Josey—she's one of my best operatives."

Josey a detective? Clear—yes—as clear as mud. Josey was on her feet now, talking rapidly, fighting for me, realizing the danger I had put myself in by taking the law into my own hands.

"You." The district attorney came over and looked at me. "What can they hold against you? I know of nothing."

I looked straight up at him. I was coming clean now.

"I killed a man here the other night," I said simply.

"You did." He stroked his chin. "Well, you can't really prove that—no witness—Mrs. Clayburn simply

saw a man fall, she tells me, and you saw no more. Nobody has been found; we won't worry about that, my boy. This sort of crooks have a way of disposing of their own dead, but we'll acquit you in legal shape before the thing's over."

"But Townsend here—the leader—the Black Circle —I killed him—I—" Then I screamed the words, "Where is Townsend? Where is the Black Circle?" The body was gone—or hadn't I killed him? When the lights first went out, had he crawled away? Yes, that was it.

Frantically men dashed from the room, searching the house, those on the grounds were cautioned to watch closely, there was no sign of him. And I—I just stood there, trying to explain to Josey that my wound was nothing, though little rivulets of blood trickled down my leg and upon the floor.

"He can't possibly escape," Mrs. Clayburn told us. "Men are all about the grounds. When Frank went to the district attorney with his story, he communicated with Crestwood and then—did the thing right."

Despite the two women at me, I went out in the hall. I must be in on the death. Four or five men were gathered on the top floor, at the foot of an open doorway which led up a rickety stairs to the attic above.

A detective was talking when I hobbled toward them.

"It's the only place he can be—here, I'll have a go at it." And he stepped through the darkened doorway. His head and shoulders were through the open trap

at the top when the shot came, just preceded by a flash of light that showed the detective's face clearly, before he tumbled back at our feet, and this time the light shone from above, straight upon that opening. Up there in the darkness was Townsend—the Black Circle—and to reach him one must cross through that deadly splash of light.

"We'll have to get some tear bombs." The detective who was taking charge of things spoke. "It's death to try to reach him."

Across my mind came the picture of Josey Mears strapped there in the chair, her little bare feet, the hot iron in Townsend's hand, the sneering smile upon his thick lips.

"Let me go," I said, and hobbled forward. "I'll get him."

"Not a chance." It was the district attorney who took me by the arm. "We're going to acquit you of one crime, but if you try to go up those steps I'll lay a charge of attempted suicide against you. It's just by luck that Jerry wasn't killed." He referred now to the man that two others had carried down the stairs.

He was right, of course. The thing would be foolhardy. I drew back, partly ashamed of my attempt at bravado. No man could mount those steps and live.

"I'll tell you what," one of the detectives cut in. "We'll douse the light in the hall here. What's to prevent the lad above throwing off his light, leaning down and slipping a bit of lead into the bunch of us?

An hour at the most, and the gas'll be here. Jake's gone to telephone now."

Sound advice; and our light went out. So we stood in the semidarkness, just that splash from above, which illuminated the opening to the attic and dimly outlined the steps below. Twice we heard a movement from above, not the steps of a walking man, but the movement of a huge body being dragged across the floor. My lead was being felt then. It was a wonder that he lived. I couldn't have missed that heart of his by much.

Time passed, my leg grew stiff, but I held my position, close up against the wall, my elbow against that of the detective who had given the advice about the light.

CHAPTER XXXV

WHO IS THE WHITE CIRCLE?

A HALF hour passed. Steps below, soft, creaking steps that slipped up the stairs, just the faintest creaking of boards beneath the silent footfall to tell of the approach.

"This can't be Jake," I heard the detective whisper. Then a figure was on the landing, a dim outline that glided toward us, partly feeling its way, then stepping more briskly out, as the light above guided him.

"You, Jake?" the detective's voice called hoarsely at my side as the figure slipped before us; a long, dark object, all arms and legs, it seemed. Then, from the detective: "Hold on! What are you doing there?" The figure had turned, passed through the doorway and was slowly mounting the steps. The detective's revolver was thrust forward. I saw its outline in the circle of light.

But the figure never heard, or never gave heed to his warning, his threatening whisper. A gasp from the others now; the head and shoulders of that specterlike apparition had thrust themselves upward into the glare of the light from above.

"Come down out of there, you damned—" There was no whisper in the detective's voice now. His tones were high, authoritative, commanding, and the gun that he raised grew steadier in his grasp. But his voice had broken off even as his finger was tightening about the trigger. The head, full in the light, had turned, and the face—the face was covered with a *shining white mask.*

Glaring eyes were peering into the darkness, great shining globes, and were clearly visible through the slits in the whiteness of the mask. And then that head raised, slipped straight above where death waited. At last I had looked upon the White Circle. And it was my gasp, my shout of warning that stayed the finger of the detective just before I knocked up his gun arm.

"For God's sake, don't shoot—it's the White Circle!" And then with an almost hysterical cry I called to that thin, long, black figure upon the stairs. "Come back! Death! The Black Circle!"

My cry was answered by a shot—a long leg upon those steps fell back a bit, then went up again—another step—another, and an arm was above. The white face had disappeared—two shots spat out together—the little hall was thick with the smell of powder, yet nobody tumbled down the stairs. A second—no more—and the White Circle had entirely disappeared in the attic above.

A cry of horror, a shout of sheer triumph, a fusil-

lade of shots, the quick patter of feet, a screech of terror and the sound of a heavy body falling upon the floor, then quiet, and the light went out. I think that I was the first upon the stairs—not the first into the attic, however. A light flashed as a figure squeezed by me. Hampered somewhat by my leg, I was second to swing onto the hard wood of the flooring above.

Voices were calling from below. I heard the district attorney censuring an officer for letting some one get in the house—and I stood in the attic, brilliantly lit by the many flashes that three detectives produced. This time there was no doubt of it—Townsend was dead. The bullet hole in the center of his forehead wasn't all. That lanky form that lay by his side—those thin but steel-like bands of fingers gripped tightly at the dead man's throat.

It took the power of two strong men to bend those fingers back from that thick throat. Strange, the sensation I got then—funny—very—no feeling except that for the first time I realized that, after all, Townsend did have a neck—a throat that the White Circle had found.

The figure of the White Circle lay upon his back by the side of the dead blackmailer—a detective knelt upon the floor, felt of that mask, gripped it and looked up. A voice had spoken over my shoulder—the voice of the district attorney, quiet and low, in awe, too, I thought.

"Let Mr. Lee lift that mask." He thrust me slightly forward. "I think there's a real surprise—shock in store for him."

Hardly breathing, I dropped to the floor, gently untied the mask, and almost reverently lifted it from that face, then I fell back with a cry of horror. The face of Oscar, white and drawn, in agony, too, I thought, but still, the face of my faithful servant, Oscar, stared up at me. Was it clear to me?

Did a hundred little things crop up suddenly to connect Oscar with the game of death I had played? No, not one, unless—yes, he had known the address of the gray-eyed little old man. But nothing more—nothing that I thought of then, and Oscar opened his eyes—he was not dead.

With a hand that he could hardly lift from the floor he waved back the men who would have lifted him and bore him below—and his voice—I had to put my ear close to his lips to get it.

"Don't let them lift me, Stacey." There was a dull brilliancy to his eyes as he called me by my first name. "I'd die—just a minute now—you want to know why—well, a wife, five years back—this man—this dead, rotten carcass that I killed, got her in his clutches. She tried to tell me—explain—I was a fool—did not—would not—understand—and she died—later, I learned—she had been trapped—I had a little money"—a pause, a gulp, hardly understandable, just a line here

and there as those eyes dulled, the lips smacked with a sucking click.

"A hundred thousand dollars—I spent only the interest of it—among servants—they were the ones—bribed by the Black Circle—doubly bribed by me—I learned when letters were taken and sold—and—but never could I find him—never—I came to you—"

"Yes," I encouraged. "But before—the gray-eyed old man—what of him, Oscar, and was it in his house—you, who struck and saved me?"

"I—yes—I struck and saved you. I listened—it was I who sent word to the paper that he was a money lender." He tried to chuckle. "Him, the old man, was the only one who knew me—you see, they first dragged his son in with them, then murdered him—yes, many times they went to murder—and the money—the hundred thousand—it is yours—I have seen to that—that—"

His eyes closed, his head that I held in my arms wabbled back, and yet his breath came—shorter, fainter—an occasional gasp, and then, suddenly, he sat bolt upright.

"The touring car, *monsieur*." And his voice sounded as of old. "It is a disgrace to the establishment—I can't die thinking of that—you must—must—promise me—swear that you will get another—a new car—a car that will be a credit to you."

"Yes, Oscar, I will get it—I swear it." I answered

him with a sincerity that I actually felt. His tone suddenly changed.

"Good—very good, *monsieur*—that tailor—you must change him—he was always the most offensive when things were not so good. And"—a pause, the dull eyes brightened. Then a shout—words that rang clearly through the entire attic—below, too, I guess.

"By God, I killed him—and—and he's dead!"

That was all, death came like the snap of a whip, no other cry, no apparent pain, no gasping for breath. His body just went limp in my arms, and the life—the soul—passed out of his eyes. A moment I held him, then I let his body softly down on the hard boards.

It was the district attorney who helped me to my feet.

"You suspected him—Oscar?" I thought of his insistence that I should lift the mask—his assurance that I would receive a shock.

"Not until just this moment," he told me. "When that figure went up the ladder I was angry—wondered, too how he had passed my men—the guard about the house. One of my men told me just before I followed you up here. Your servant had sought admission; Mrs. Clayburn identified him and he was allowed to come above. He must have slipped the mask on as he came up the last flight of stairs."

I nodded.

"You heard what he said?" I asked, as I turned

my head away—back to that silent figure upon the floor.

"Yes." And his voice seemed to come from a long way off. "I heard most of it—enough." Then, tapping his head significantly: "Plumb crazy—nothing more."

I didn't say anything, but I wondered—yes, and doubted.

It was the Clayburns who drove Josey and me back to the city—the district attorney just shook his head when I asked him if he intended to hold me.

"It'll have to come out—parts of it, I'm afraid," he said. "But you have nothing to worry about—nothing."

I looked at Josey in the back seat beside me, then at the back of the Clayburns ahead—not once did they turn around.

"Josey"—I pulled her head upon my shoulder—"did they blackmail you, too—this husband, Josey—you're —you're not married?"

"Not yet, but I hope to be," she murmured softly as I kissed her. We were nearly home before she told me the truth about that.

"My supposed husband was a detective—we posed as being married and—now don't be mad, Stacey—you see—oh, I ran around a bit with other men. Soon my activities fell under the eyes of the blackmailers. They were easy to identify—these workers of the Black Circle—and it was not hard to find means of slipping

false evidence against me into their hands. They thought my husband a wealthy foreigner—one who sought a divorce, so they trapped me to work for them for the price of silence concerning my misdeeds, which, dear Stacey, were many."

"Don't tell me about them, Josey." All a pretense, of course, but I didn't want to hear any more—the night was dark, the shades were drawn, the eyes of the Clayburns steadily before them, and—well, Josey was Josey and I loved her.

About Oscar—no papers were found—nothing to identify him, and no sign of a will or the hundred thousand dollars he had spoken of. Was he, after all, demented—a strange, dual personality? But I did not believe that—not for a moment.

Many days I spent with the district attorney—more with Josey—and things were slowly straightening out—in secret, most of it—the names of prominent people were involved—socially known youths and matrons were unwilling dupes of the Townsends. It was Mrs. Townsend who suffered the most, I guess, but she slipped quietly away, where, none seemed to know.

I must attend to my own affairs now, look after my balance, find exactly what securities my safe-deposit vault contained. My finances were not so good for a man who expected to get married and had promised himself a trip abroad. My step was not so light as I walked into the bank, nor was it my foot that bothered

me, the thing had healed up quickly, the bullet been extracted by an expert hand. But—and a big BUT—my step was light when I left the bank, I whistled a tune, stopped at a steamship office and engaged passage for two on one of the big liners sailing the following week.

Where did I raise the money—suddenly feel the glitter of wealth? One hundred thousand dollars in good American currency was the first thing that struck my eyes as I opened my safe-deposit box—and with it a scribbled note from Oscar:

Monsieur, my friend:

I leave it here for you, for I have the confidence that tells me you will succeed where for so long I have failed. I owe it to you, too. It was through my advice that your investments were bad. But I needed you—knew of no other way. So my plan—our plan.

Things are closing in—I more than suspect the real identity of him who calls himself the Black Circle.

No more—some day I shall tell you all.

Faithfully, your servant,

Oscar.

Is there more to write? I think not, unless perhaps about Josey. There is a clinch at the end of this story, the same as there is a clinch at the beginning of life.

I stood beside her as the preacher said the words—and later sat long hours beside her while the soft water of the Mediterranean whispered up to us. It took time, of course, but what is time, for we were young.

THE END

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